

Article

The Humanistic Value of Proverbs in Sociopolitical Discourse

Wolfgang Mieder

Department of German and Russian, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405-0160, USA;
Wolfgang.Mieder@uvm.edu

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Abstract: Proverbs as strategic signs for recurrent situations have long played a significant communicative role in political rhetoric. Folk proverbs as well as Bible proverbs appear as expressions of wisdom and common sense, adding authority and didacticism to the multifaceted aspects of sociopolitical discourse. Some proverbs like the golden rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12) or “It takes a village to raise a child” can function as traditional leitmotifs while other well-known proverbs might be changed into anti-proverbs to express innovative insights. The moralistic, evaluative, and argumentative employment of proverbs can be seen in the letters, speeches and writings by Lord Chesterfield, Abigail Adams, and Benjamin Franklin in the eighteenth century. Fredrick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony stand out in their use of proverbs for civil and women’s rights during the nineteenth century. This effective preoccupation with proverbs for sociopolitical improvements can also be observed in the impressive oratory of Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Bernie Sanders in the modern age. The ubiquitous proverbs underscore various political messages and add metaphorical as well as folkloric expressiveness to the worldview that social reformers and politicians wish to communicate. As commonly held beliefs the proverbs clearly bring humanistic values to political communications as they argue for an improved world order.

Keywords: authority; Bible; civil rights; common sense; communication; democracy; equality; ethics; folk wisdom; golden rule; leitmotif; metaphor; paremiology; politics; rhetoric; worldview

At first glance it might well appear that proverbs as the most concise form of such verbal folklore genres as fairy tales, legends, jokes, and riddles would also have to be the simplest (Permiakov 1970; Koch 1994; Abrahams 2005, pp. 39–69). That assumption is quickly shown to be utterly false when comprehensive international bibliographies listing annotated proverb collections and the multifaceted scholarship on proverbs are consulted (Moll 1958; Mieder 2009a). The collection and study of proverbs goes back to antiquity with comprehensive studies existing in various languages (Lambert 1960, pp. 213–82; Alster 1997). Archer Taylor’s *The Proverb* (Taylor 1931) is considered the classic survey of the origin, content, and style of proverbs including a final section on such sub-genres as proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, and wellerisms. The more recent *Proverbs. A Handbook* (2004) presents an update of sorts by including the modern paremiological scholarship with a special section on the various scholarly approaches to the study of proverbs: (1) proverb journals, essay volumes, and bibliographies; (2) proverb collections and future paremiography; (3) comprehensive overviews of paremiology; (4) empiricism and paremiological minima (the most frequent 300 proverbs for a given language, see (Mieder 1992; Haas 2008)); (5) linguistic and semiotic considerations; (6) performance (speech acts) in social contexts; (7) issues of culture, folklore, and history; (8) politics, stereotypes, and worldview; (9) sociology, psychology, and psychiatry; (10) use in folk narratives and literature; (11) religion and wisdom literature; (12) pedagogy and language teaching; (13) iconography: proverbs in art; and (14) mass media and popular culture (Mieder 2004, pp. 117–59; Norrick 1985; Honeck 1997;

Hrisztova-Gotthardt and Varga 2015). The book also includes sections on definition and classification, proverbs from different cultures and languages, several historical studies of individual proverbs, and a number of case studies on the use and function of proverbs by literary authors and public figures. Altogether this handbook presents ample proof that the ubiquitous proverbs always have been and most certainly continue to be part of oral and written communication. They serve the human inclination to summarize observations and experiences into generalized nuggets of wisdom that in turn can be employed as ready-made comments on everyday relationships and sociopolitical affairs of various types. The polysituativity, polyfunctionality, and polysemanticity (Krikmann 2009, pp. 15–50) of the only seemingly rigid proverbs—their textual fixidity can easily be broken in context—render them incredibly adaptable to changing times and mores. And, very importantly, it must not be forgotten that proverbs as everything else in life come and go. Proverbs whose imagery or message do not fit into the modern age disappear—as can be seen from the “dead wood” in proverb collections (Mieder et al. 1992)—and new proverbs gain general currency, to wit such favorites as “Different strokes for different folks” or “If life hands you lemons, make lemonade” (Mieder 1989, pp. 317–32; McKenzie 1996; Doyle et al. 2012). They are also not always didactic, authoritative or proscriptive but can take on many indirectly (usually by way of metaphors) expressed intents and meanings.

One thing is for certain, proverbs have not outlived their communicative usefulness in sophisticated technological societies as has falsely been claimed by scholars (Albig 1931; Stewart 1991, pp. 17–19) and as can be read again and again in articles debunking the truth value of proverbs in the popular press (Mieder and Sobieski 2006). The fact that such contradictory proverb pairs as “Out of sight, out of mind” and “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” or “Look before you leap” and “He who hesitates is lost” exist makes it perfectly clear that proverbs are not based on a logical philosophical system. Proverbs are as contradictory as life itself, and depending on their use in a certain context, they prove to be either true or false. The art of proverb employment lies in citing the perfectly fitting one at the right occasion. And while the frequency of their employment might vary among speakers and writers, proverbs remain an effective discursive force in various communicative modes, from sermons to gossip, from lyrical poetry to dramatic dialogue, from short stories to novels, from conversational chatter to forceful political rhetoric, and from rap music to slogans and headlines in the mass media. Proverbs are indeed everywhere and have been studied from a multitude of perspectives from the classical times of Aristotle to the humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam and on to such great minds as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bertolt Brecht in more modern times who both did not only use proverbs but also showed great theoretical interest in them (Mieder 2014b, pp. 261–83; 2000a, pp. 237–64). There is no need for concern about the possible demise or death of proverbs today, as can easily be seen from the content of a book with the absolutely appropriate title *Proverbs Are Never out of Season. Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* (Mieder 1993). And, to be sure, yet another book title claims proverbially that “*Proverbs Speak Louder Than Words.*” *Folk Wisdom in Art, Culture, Folklore, History, Literature, and Mass Media* (Mieder 2008), indicating that it behooves humanists to pay close attention to proverbs. Their steady appearance in the epideictic inaugural addresses of American presidents is certainly proof positive that they continue to be of considerable humanistic value in sociopolitical discourse (Mieder 2005, pp. 147–86). In his enlightening article on “Maxims, ‘Practical Wisdom,’ and the Language of Action: Beyond Grand Theory”, the political scientist Ray Nichols has argued convincingly that political rhetoric must be characterized by “‘practical wisdom,’ ‘practical knowledge,’ ‘practical reason,’ [and] ‘practical judgment’” (Nichols 1996, p. 687) that literally calls for proverbial praxis in the rhetoric of politics. After all, a well-chosen maxim (a memorable phrase) or a well-known proverb add considerable communicative and emotional quality to the political discourse and might well underscore the value system and mentality of the people (Raymond 1956; Mieder 1997).

It would be a welcome task to trace the humanistic value of proverbs in sociopolitical discourse throughout the centuries, including the proverbial rhetoric of Cicero, Thomas More, Martin Luther, Otto von Bismarck, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to name but a few of many candidates (Mieder and Bryan 1996). For now it must suffice to look at several representative figures from the Anglo-American

world of the 18th century to the present. Realizing that social politics are not only part of the national scene but can play out in family interactions as well, one Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773) and his relationship to his illegitimate son Philip Stanhope (1732–1768) come to mind (Mieder 2000a, pp. 37–68). Lord Chesterfield, as the father is generally known, was a well-educated British diplomat and a perfect example of the Age of Reason who felt that life in general and that of his son in particular could and should be controlled by reason. As somewhat of an intellectual snob he had no use for proverbs as he stressed the importance of proper social behavior in a letter of 25 July 1741, to his son:

There is an awkwardness of expression and words, most carefully to be avoided: such as false English, bad pronunciation, old sayings, and common proverbs; which are so many proofs of having kept bad or low company. For example, if, instead of saying that tastes are different, and that every man has his own peculiar one, you should let off a proverb, and say, That what is one man's meat is another man's poison; or else, Everyone as they like, as the good man said when he kissed his cow, everybody would be persuaded that you had never kept company with anybody above footmen and housemaids. (Stanhope 1901, vol. II, p. 401)

Such tirades against proverbs find their *summum bonum* in a lengthy letter to his son of 27 September 1749, with Lord Chesterfield standing on his rhetorical soapbox for proper linguistic and social behavior:

Vulgarism in language is the next and distinguishing characteristic of bad company and bad education. A man of fashion avoids nothing with more care than that. Proverbial expressions and trite sayings are the flowers of the rhetoric of a vulgar man. Would he say that men differ in their tastes; he both supports and adorns that opinion by the good old saying, as he respectfully calls it, that What is one man's meat, is another man's poison. A man of fashion never has recourse to proverbs and vulgar aphorisms; uses neither favorite words nor hard words; but takes great care to speak very correctly and grammatically, and to pronounce properly; that is, according to the usage of the best companies. (Stanhope 1901, vol. I, p. 218)

The basis of Lord Chesterfield's educational philosophy and pedagogical program for his son consisted of the conviction that certain social graces must be maintained, including good manners, proper speech, moderation, civility, self-control, politeness, etc. Proverbs were too vulgar, that is too low and common, to be of any use in upper society. And yet, when one reads the entire massive correspondence with his son, it becomes clear that Lord Chesterfield could not escape proverbs in his self-righteous tirades. Some proverbs are simply too good to drive home an important point or message, as can be seen from his repeated use of the proverb "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today" as an expression of solid work ethics. Just imagine the vexed reaction of his son receiving the following statement from his didactic father:

Use yourself, therefore, in time to be alert and diligent in your concerns; never procrastinate, never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day; and never do two things at a time; pursue your object, be what it will, steadily and indefatigably; and let any difficulties (if insurmountable) rather animate than slacken your endeavors. Perseverance has surprising effects. (Stanhope 1901, vol. II, p. 185)

It appears that Lord Chesterfield would have had strong objections to modern multi-tasking. Be that as it may, he definitely had a proverb that served him as a *leitmotif* for teaching his son the basic principle of proper human behavior, i.e., the Biblical golden rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matt. 7:12) in its many variants (Hertzler 1933–1934; Burrell 1997, pp. 13–27; Templeton 1997, pp. 8–12). The following excerpt from his letter of 27 September 1748, represents the summary of his entire moral teaching to his son: "Pray let not quibbles of lawyers, no refinements of casuists, break into the plain notions of right and wrong, which every man's right reason and plain

common sense suggest to him. To do as you would be done by, is the plain, sure, and undisputed rule of morality and justice. Stick to that" (Stanhope 1901, vol. I, p. 117). One thing is for certain, despite Lord Chesterfield's apparent dislike of proverbs, they repeatedly enter his educational epistles automatically as preformulated rules of proper conduct. No wonder that his son escaped this constant barrage of proverbial etiquette by fleeing his domineering father to live with his wife away from England. Clearly neither Lord Chesterfield nor his Age of Enlightenment could avoid the social use of metaphorical proverbs (Seitel 1969), and this is also evident by their appearance in the writings of such greats of his age as Goethe, Voltaire, and Kant.

Across the ocean there is another epistolary example of proverbs being employed as a didactic tool, but this time by the intelligent, diligent, resourceful, and quite independent Abigail Adams (1744–1818), who was perfectly capable of raising her children and running the farm while her husband John was off to France and England in the service of his country before becoming the second president of the United States. She had no quibbles with the value of proverbs but considered them the perfect instrument to teach by way of experienced common sense (Mieder 2005, pp. 56–89). Her letter of 2 March 1780, to her son John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States, is reminiscent of some of Lord Chesterfield's letters. In fact, she had read an early edition of his correspondence and surely came across his frequent use of the proverb "If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well." So like the father to his son, it is now the well-intending mother preaching to her son in sound proverbial language:

You have great reason for thankfulness to your kind preserver, who hath again carried you through many dangers, preserved your Life and given you an opportunity of making further improvements in virtue and knowledge. You must consider that every Moment of your time is precious, if trifled away never to be recalled. Do not spend too much of it in recreation, it will never afford you that permanent satisfaction which the acquisition of one Art or Science will give you, and whatever you undertake aim to make yourself perfect in it, for if it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well. (Butterfield 1963–1993, vol. III, p. 293)

Indeed, Abigail at times comes across as a female Chesterfield, never lacking the words to give advice for proper social conduct, but there is much more to her proverbial use as a concerned matriarch during the long absences of her politically engaged husband. Proverbs like "God helps them who help themselves", "Necessity has no law", and "Hope springs eternal" help her to cope, but her proverbial letters do not only preach the puritan life. Even though as a woman she had no public political voice, she was heavily involved in the sociopolitical affairs of her days by way of strong and influential letters to her husband. Thus her letter of 27 November 1775, contains a powerful statement about human nature at the time of American revolutionary reactions against the British abuse of power. The proverb "Big fish eat little fish" has served as a metaphor to describe human power struggles since ancient times (Mieder 1987, pp. 178–228), and it is the perfect expression for the politics of her time that is a clear indication that humanity in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment has not advanced much beyond the rapacious fish world:

I am more and more convinced that Man is a dangerous creature, and that power whether vested in many or a few is ever grasping, and like the grave cries give, give. The great fish swallow up the small, and he who is most strenuous for the Rights of the people, when vested with power, is as eager after the prerogatives of Government. You tell me of degrees of perfection to which Humane Nature is capable of arriving, and I believe it, but at the same time lament that our admiration should arise from the scarcity of the instances. (Butterfield 1963–1993, vol. I, p. 329)

What a devastating indictment of humanity regarding the corruptness of governmental power! And she even condemns slavery, albeit indirectly, in her letter of 31 March 1776, to John with whom she shared the distinction of not owning slaves:

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us. (Butterfield 1963–1993, vol. I, p. 359)

Clearly the proverbial golden rule was the perfect expression to give authority to her argument against slavery, and it should not be surprising that this Bible proverb became a *leitmotif* about seven decades later in the powerful anti-slavery rhetoric of Frederick Douglass. Reading many more proverbial observations of this type by both Abigail and John Adams, it seems strange that scholars have repeatedly argued that proverbs were of little value during the eighteenth century (Jente 1945, p. 116; Obelkevich 1987, p. 57).

Of course, one only needs to turn to Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), the printer, inventor, scientist, businessman, diplomat, and one of the founding fathers of the United States, to dispel any notion that proverbs might have become irrelevant in his age. In 25 years of his annual *Poor Richards's Almanack* (1733–1758) he included 1044 proverbs (about 40 each year), of which he chose 105 to be part of his celebrated essay “The Way to Wealth” (1758) that became a secular Bible of sorts in America (Barbour 1974; Mieder 2004, pp. 216–24). Most of the proverbs he copied from earlier English proverb collections (Newcomb 1957), with only very few proverbs like “Three removes is (are) as bad as a fire” and “There will be sleeping enough in the grave” being his very own inventions (Gallacher 1949). His famous essay is a literal cannonade of proverbial wisdom, as just this short excerpt amply illustrates:

If time be of all things the most precious, wasting time must be, as Poor Richard says, the greatest prodigality; since, as elsewhere he tells us, Lost time is never found again; and what we call time enough, always proves little enough. Let us then up and be doing, and doing to the purpose; so by diligence shall we do more with less perplexity. Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all easy, and He that riseth late must trot all day, and shall scarce overtake his business at night; while Laziness travels so slowly, that Poverty soon overtakes him. Drive thy business, let not that drive thee, and Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise, as Poor Richard says. (The entire essay in (Sparks 1840, vol. II, pp. 94–103))

With his almanacks selling as many as 10,000 copies each year in the early colonies, his essay “The Way to Wealth” became an absolute international “hit” with translations into numerous languages. Many of the proverbs became associated with either the fictional “Poor Richard” or with Franklin himself. This continues to the present day so that people for example cite the proverb “Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise” with the authoritative introductory formula “as Benjamin Franklin says”. And yet, this very proverb has been traced back to the late fifteenth century with Franklin at best being able to claim that he helped to popularize it in the United States in particular (Mieder 1993, pp. 98–134). In any case, Franklin’s obsession with proverbs led to what today is called Puritan ethics with its emphasis on virtue, prosperity, prudence, and economic common sense. As such, especially “The Way to Wealth” with its Puritan ethics expressed in but a hundred proverbs helped to shape the worldview of the young American nation and continues to have an indirect influence to this very day. Franklin and “his” proverbs were everywhere, including broadsheets, plates, and cups with the proverbial texts and illustrations. If one is lucky enough to find such paraphernalia in antique shops today, they will not to be had for less than two hundred dollars. The influence of Franklin on the social life of this country by way of the humanistic value of the good advice of proverbs is surely very considerable indeed.

Moving on to the nineteenth century leads to the former slave and renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) who as an African American dominated the sociopolitical discourse in the United States and Europe for fifty years! Without any formal education whatsoever, he became a most impressive rhetorician whose *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by himself* (1845,

expanded twice in 1855 and 1893) became a classic in his lifetime. Two sets of five massive volumes each of his speeches and writing bear witness to his rhetorical skills and moral courage in the service of abolitionism and civil rights. He doubtlessly was a social and political agitator *par excellence*, always arguing for morality, equality, and democracy. His rhetorical prowess is legendary, but it has taken a long time to recognize that a major element of his oratorical power was his repeated use of Biblical and folk proverbs that added authoritative and traditional wisdom to his engaged arguments (Mieder 2001; 2005, pp. 118–46). He was so keenly aware of proverbs that he summarized his life's philosophy in a speech of 3 August 1857, at Canandaigua, New York, into a proverb-like utterance that by now has become proverbial in the slightly shorted form of "No struggle, no progress":

Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. (Blassingame 1985–1992, vol. III, p. 204)

Douglass saw his struggle as an enlightened progress based on non-violent moral suasion, but he was well aware that the mistreatment of Blacks could result in violence. As a warning, he relied several times on the sixteenth-century English proverb "Tread on a worm and it will turn", where the worm becomes a metaphor for the miserable life of the slaves. The following incredibly powerful utterance stems from an anti-slavery speech that he delivered on 8 December 1850, in his hometown of Rochester, New York:

I would warn the American people, and the American government, to be wise in their day and generation. I exhort them to remember the history of other nations; and I remind them that America cannot always sit "as a queen," in peace and repose; that prouder and stronger governments than this have been shattered by the bolts of a just God [. . .]. There is a point beyond which human endurance cannot go. The crushed worm may yet turn under the heel of the oppressor. I warn them, then, with all solemnity, and in the name of retributive justice, to look to their ways; for in an evil hour, those sable arms that have, for the last two centuries, been engaged in cultivating and adorning the fair fields of our country, may yet become the instruments of terror, desolation, and death, throughout our borders. (Blassingame 1985–1992, vol. II, p. 271)

Anybody who witnessed in person or on film the civil rights marches and the struggles to keep them peaceful under the leadership of Martin Luther King, who certainly was influenced by Douglass, will be experiencing a *déjà vu* here. Douglass is drawing attention to a very precarious situation by way of the somewhat changed proverb that renders its metaphorical language even more powerful.

Again and again Douglass turned to the proverbs of the Bible (Fontaine 1982; Winton 1990; McKenzie 1996; Dundes 1999) to underpin his anti-slavery arguments, making the proverbial golden rule his often repeated *leitmotif* as in this early speech of 6 January 1846:

It [the Bible] is filled with the Wisdom from above, which is pure, and peaceable, and full of mercies and good fruits, without prolixity, and without hypocrisy. It knows no one by the color of his skin. It confers no privilege upon class, which it does not confer upon another. The fundamental principle running through and underlying the whole, is this—"Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do you even so unto them." If you claim liberty for yourself, grant it to your neighbor. If you, yourself, were a slave, and would desire the aid of

your fellow-man to rescue you from the clutch of the enslaver, you surely are bound by that very desire to labor for the freedom of those whom you know to be in bonds. (Blassingame 1985–1992, vol. I, p. 129)

The golden rule that exists in close variants in all major religions (Griffin 1991, pp. 67–69) is clearly the most prevalent proverb in sociopolitical discourse, and it should not come as a surprise that President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), clearly influenced by Douglass’s rhetoric, also made effective emotional use of its message. But while Douglass was more verbose or even long-winded in his eloquent sociopolitical rhetoric, Lincoln, except in his lengthy public debates with Stephen Douglas, is much more precise in his speeches and letters. So much more reason for him to integrate folk and Bible proverbs into his weighty utterances (Mieder 2000b; 2005, pp. 90–117). His preoccupation with Biblical proverbs could take on overpowering proportions, as in the following satirical masterpiece written to a delegation of Baptists on 30 May 1864:

I can only thank you for adding to the effective and almost unanimous support which the Christian communities are so zealously giving to the country, and to liberty. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive how it could be otherwise with any one professing Christianity, or even having ordinary perceptions of right and wrong. To read the Bible, as the word of God himself, that “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” [Gen. 3:19], and to preach there from that “In the sweat of other mans [*sic*] faces shalt thou eat bread,” to my mind can scarcely be reconciled with honest sincerity. When brought to my final reckoning, may I have to answer for robbing no man of his goods; yet more tolerable even this, than for robbing one of himself, and all that was his. When, a year or two ago, those professedly holy men of the South, met in the semblance of prayer and devotion, and, in the Name of Him who said “As ye would all men should do unto you, do even ye so unto them” [Matt. 7:12] appeal to the Christian world to aid them in doing to a whole race of men, as they would have no man do unto themselves, to my thinking they contemned and insulted God and His church, far more than Satan when he tempted the Saviour with the Kingdoms of the earth. The devil’s attempt was no more false, and far less hypocritical. But let me forbear, remembering it is also written “Judge not, lest ye be judged” [Matt. 7:1]. (Basler 1953, vol. VII, p. 368)

What a paragraph with its three well-known proverbs from the Bible! Without mentioning the word “slavery”, Lincoln ridicules the Southern ministers and the slaveholders of the South who earned their bread through the hard work of their slaves. He also points out that they have all forgotten the humane message of the golden rule. And then, with his typical humility, he quotes the third proverb about judging others, warning that self-righteousness will not do to overcome slavery. The satirical message is direct, clear, and authoritative, with the didactic Bible proverbs adding ethical persuasiveness to this masterful paragraph.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that Lincoln forgot about the rhetorical effectiveness of folk proverbs. That this is absolutely not the case can be seen from the last paragraph of his famous Cooper Union speech on 27 February 1860, at New York City. Lincoln had outlined his solid commitment to maintaining the Union and to keeping slavery from spreading beyond where it existed, concluding his speech with an unforgettable oratorical crescendo:

Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it. (Basler 1953, vol. III, p. 550)

This is indeed a powerful peroration, with “Right makes might” often being cited as a Lincoln quotation today (Shapiro 2006, p. 461). However, he was in fact quoting the fourteenth-century proverb “Right makes might” whose antipode “Might makes right” is just as old (Mieder 2014c). In any case, the proverb adds conviction and authority to Lincoln’s argument. It summarizes everything he had

said in his speech, namely that the preservation of the Union and the geographical control of slavery are just and “right” goals. Believing in these two goals will give people the “might” to keep the sociopolitical status quo under control.

Of course, Lincoln’s faith in this was broken when he was unable to prevent the start of the Civil War as president a year later. It was a gloomy time when he left Springfield, Illinois, on 11 February 1861, on his way to Washington to assume the presidency. Stopping at Tolono, Illinois, here is what this quiet, humble, and noble man said:

I am leaving you on an errand of national importance, attended, as you are aware, with considerable difficulties. Let us believe, as some poet has expressed it: “Behind the cloud the sun is still shining.” I bid you an affectionate farewell. (Basler 1953, vol. IV, p. 191)

Today he would have cited the more common proverb “Every cloud has a silver lining”, but the people who had met his train to see him off certainly knew the variant “Behind the cloud the sun is shining” and were able to appreciate its hopeful message at the eve of the Civil War. It was the perfect piece of folk wisdom to use in this short impromptu statement intended to calm an anxious citizenship.

And here is one final example for Lincoln’s employment of folk proverbs to underscore his determination to do the right and moral thing. He had finally issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863, among plenty of opposition and calls for its retraction. But the president was committed to this noble act, as he explained in a letter of 8 January 1863, to Major General John A. McClernand. As can be seen, he very consciously chose the metaphorical proverb “Broken eggs cannot be mended” to express his determination to keep the proclamation intact:

I never did ask more, nor ever was willing to accept less, than for all the States, and the people thereof, to take and hold their places, and their rights, in the Union under the Constitution of the United States. For this alone have I felt authorized to struggle; and I seek neither more nor less now. Still, to use a coarse, but an expressive figure, broken eggs can not be mended. I have issued the emancipation proclamation, and I can not retract it. (Basler 1953, vol. VI, p. 48)

This is but one of many such proverbial paragraphs in Lincoln’s statements. In this particular case—it is strange that he does not use the term “proverb” here—this “coarse” (in the sense of common, folksy) proverb expresses in simple metaphorical language his strong will to maintain the humane emancipation of the slaves. The proverb proves itself not to be just a trite remark but becomes of much humanistic value in this context.

Clearly the friends Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln will forever be two shining lights of the sociopolitical history of the United States. But to be sure, there are two remarkable women of the nineteenth century who can stand as their distinguished equals in their fifty years of committed struggle for women’s rights in particular and civil rights in general. And expectedly by now, both early feminists Elisabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) and her dear friend Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) relied heavily on proverbs from the Bible and the folk to add authority, expressiveness and humanistic value to their multitude of speeches, essays, and letters (Mieder 2014a, 2015c). More importantly, they are any time the equals of the male political giants when it comes to the employment of proverbial language in their unceasing, emotive, and aggressive struggle for women’s rights. They called on proverbs to add generational wisdom to their arguments, realizing that proverbs are strategies for dealing with recurrent social situations (Burke 1941) that need to be questioned and changed as far as the sociopolitical role of women is concerned.

Just like their friend Frederick Douglass with his “No struggle, no progress”, each of these two grand ladies has one especially unique utterance that has become proverbial as an invaluable sociopolitical statement. In the case of Elisabeth Cady Stanton it is what she did with the proverb “All men are created equal” from the “Declaration of Independence” (Mieder 2015a). As is well known, the women’s rights convention held on 19–20 July 1848, at Seneca Falls, New York, was the birth of the movement for gender equality and women’s suffrage. With about three hundred people in attendance,

Stanton presented her magisterial manifesto “Declaration of Sentiments” that begins with a rhetorical stroke of genius that brought the audience to its feet. Its beginning was so very familiar, but then came that unexpected revolutionary alteration of the male-oriented proverb:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. (Gordon 1997–2013, vol. I, pp. 78–79)

The expansion of “all men” to “all men and women” is, of course, not the only change in this obvious parody that leaves no room for humor. Stanton and the other women clearly meant business, because it is high time that the female “portion of the family of man” claims its natural rights and demands “the equal station to which they [women] are entitled”. And to be sure, as stated in the original Declaration and repeated verbatim in this manifesto, this includes the proverbial triad of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Aron 2008, pp. 91–96).

Susan B. Anthony’s call to proverbial fame stems from her strong argument for women entering various professions without being discriminated because of their gender. The ever agitating Anthony was also protesting against the salary discrepancy between men and women as early as 8 October 1869, when she wrote in *The Revolution*: “Join the union, girls, and together say, ‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’” (Shapiro 2006, p. 23). Some thirty years later, in a speech on 29 July 1897, Anthony returned to her sententious remark turned proverb by then and became—how could it be otherwise!—an outspoken champion of its significant message:

What I have been working for all these years is just this—when Sally Ann [Hyatt] does know more and does better work than [her brother] James [Hyatt], the superintendent, she shall be put in the position of the superintendents and have a superintendent’s salary. That is the whole question. Equal pay for equal work. There isn’t a woman in the sound of my voice, who does not want this justice. There never was one—there never will be one who does not want justice and equality. But they have not yet learned that equal work and equal wages can come only through the political equality, represented by the ballot. (Gordon 1997–2013, vol. VI, p. 155)

It is of interest to note that in 1897 Anthony had no choice but to argue that the demand of “Equal pay for equal work” would have no way of becoming law as long as women did not have the right to cast their vote. Finally then, there is this short excerpt from a letter of 6 July 1903, to Margaret Haley: “Women must have equal pay for equal work, and they must be considered equally eligible to the offices of principal and superintendent, professor and president. The saying that women have equal pay is absurd while they are not allowed to have the highest positions which their qualifications entitle them to; so you must insist that qualifications, not sex, shall govern the appointments to the highest positions” (Gordon 1997–2013, vol. VI, pp. 482–83). More than hundred years later the struggle for equal pay for equal work is still going on, but great progress has indeed been made and it behooves modern women to give considerable credit for these advances to Susan B. Anthony in particular.

As most social reformers, both women employed the golden rule as a proverbial sign of equality. In her address to the Legislature of New York on 14 February 1854, Stanton pointed to the misogyny in the legal system and argued that women deserved the same protection under the law that is granted to men:

But if, gentlemen [the legislators], you take the ground that the sexes are alike, and, therefore, you are our faithful representatives—then why all these special laws for woman? Would not one code answer for all of like needs and wants? Christ's golden rule is better than all the special legislation that the ingenuity of man can devise: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." This, men and brethren, is all we ask at your hands. We ask no better laws than those you have made for yourselves. We need no other protection than that which your present laws secure to you. (Gordon 1997–2013, vol. I, p. 254)

And her friend Anthony took the Bible proverb also into the realm of government during a speech on 10 September 1889, in her hometown of Rochester, New York:

As a representative of the most radical and hence the most unpopular demand for the practical application of the Golden Rule as the basis of our religion, and the Declaration of Independence as the basis of our Government, I esteem the invitation to address this class [of young men] not only a high honor but a most significant "sign of the times." I shall take it for granted that the members of it are believers in good government. To acquire this we must have good citizens. The old maxim that the fountain can rise no higher than its head, is no truer in the law of physics than in the law of political ethics, that the government can be no higher than the majority of its constituents. Hence, if our city, State or national government is not what we wish, the remedy is not in securing new officials but larger numbers of good constituents—in other words make the source higher. (Harper 1898–1908, vol. III, pp. 1148–49)

What a rhetorical coup to combine her allusions to the Bible proverb "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and the quotation long turned proverb "All men are created equal" with the folk proverb "The fountain can rise no higher than its head" and turn them into "radical" demands for "good government" on all levels that accepts women as equal partners. The fact that she delivered this proverbial manifesto in front of young men was indeed a hopeful "sign of the times".

Of course, Elizabeth Cady Stanton is equally adept at integrating folk proverbs into her verbal agitations as she addressed large crowds throughout the United States. Here is an example of her use of the proverb "Two dogs over one bone seldom agree" in a speech of 30 May 1874, that also deals with the issue of voting rights:

There is no danger that women will corrupt politics or that politics will corrupt them. But when the women vote they will be pretty sure to demand better and cleaner [sic] places for voting. Law should be a holy thing and the ballot box the holy of holies. It is claimed that the ballot for women will divide the family, or merely duplicate the voting. But it produces unpleasantness in the family now. Give two dogs a bone and they will fight over it. But give them two bones and there is peace immediately. Woman would not be so bothered and perplexed over the finance question as men are. (Gordon 1997–2013, vol. III, p. 83)

As but these few contextualized references show, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony championed women's rights and equality for all people by way of their engaged, courageous, and expressive rhetoric that was informed to a considerable degree by proverbial wisdom based on humane values.

No doubt Martin Luther King (1929–1968) would have admired these two exemplary social reformers who knew that social change will not come by way of lip service but must be accomplished through words and deeds, something that King did with unwavering commitment. Trained in the

Baptist sermonic tradition with its Bible proverbs and having grown up with folk proverbs in his African American community (Prahlaad 1996), he realized that proverbial language would serve him extremely well in his sermons, speeches, and writings to bring his nonviolent civil rights message across to the American people. In fact, his frequent use of proverbs can be seen as the quintessential example of the humanistic value of proverbs in the modern sociopolitical discourse. His repertoire of proverbs is truly astounding, and there can be no doubt that this traditional wisdom from the Bible and the folk added considerable metaphorical expressiveness to his rhetoric which in turn made it possible for him to reach and touch millions of people (Mieder 2010; 2014b, pp. 133–71).

As expected, Martin Luther King as a minister relies heavily on Bible proverbs in his many emotionally charged sermons. When he delivered one of the versions of his well-known sermon “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” on 9 April 1967, at New Covenant Church in Chicago, he included the proverb “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” as an expression of reciprocal love and two additional proverbial Bible passages from Amos and Isaiah. Above all, he summarizes the three dimensions of a complete life—how could it be otherwise?—by way of the golden rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. But here then is King’s rhetorical masterpiece that amasses four Bible proverbs into a powerful statement of love, justice, peace, and morality:

Go out this morning. Love yourself, and that means rational and healthy self-interest. You are commanded to do that. That’s the length of life. Then follow that: Love your neighbor as you love yourself [Gal. 5:14]. You are commanded to do that. That’s the breadth of life. And I’m going to take my seat now by letting you know that there’s a first and even greater commandment: “Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, [Yeah] with all thy soul, with all thy strength.” I think the psychologist would just say “with all thy personality.” And when you do that, you’ve got the breadth [King meant to say: height] of life.

And when you get all three of these together, you can walk and never get weary. You can look up and see the morning stars singing together, and the sons of God shouting for joy. When you get all of these working together in your very life, judgment will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream [Amos 5:24].

When you get all the three of these together, the lamb will lie down with the lion [Isaiah 11:6].
[...].

When you get all three of these working together, you will do unto others as you’d have them do unto you [Matt. 7:12].

When you get all three of these together, you will recognize that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth. (Carson and Holloran 1998, p. 139)

And yet, despite of its grand Biblical and moral rhetoric, this passage says nothing about racial and social matters. But such exclusion is relatively rare, with his usual *modus operandi* being to combine religious and sociopolitical implications of the proverbial wisdom included in his sermons and speeches. A fine example involves the widely known Bible proverb “Man does not live by bread alone” (Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4) that appears in both the Old and New Testaments. King used it in a sermon on “The Christian Doctrine of Man” on 12 March 1958, at Detroit, stating that he as a minister has a moral and social obligation to his parishioners and the world at large. But there is also an extremely important interpretive twist of the proverb in this text when King states that the word “alone” in the proverb implies that Jesus was very well aware that man cannot live without bread nor by it alone. And this in turn gives King the proverbial argument that poverty must be combated in the United States and throughout the world:

And so in Christianity the body is sacred. The body is significant. This means that in any Christian doctrine of man we must forever be concerned about man’s physical well-being.

Jesus was concerned about that. He realized that men had to have certain physical necessities. One day he said, “Man cannot live by bread alone” [Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4]. [Yeah] But the mere fact that the “alone” was added means that Jesus realized that man could not live without bread. [Yes] So as a minister of the gospel, I must not only preach to men and women to be good, but I must be concerned about the social conditions that often make them bad. [Yeah] It’s not enough for me to tell men to be honest, but I must be concerned about the economic conditions that make them dishonest. [Amen] I must be concerned about the poverty in the world. I must be concerned about the ignorance in the world. I must be concerned about the slums in the world. (Carson et al. 1992–2007, vol. VI, p. 332)

Usually relying on the proverbial wisdom of Jesus (Winton 1990), King found the perfect metaphor for his social agenda in the New Testament proverb “He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). It became *the* symbolic argument against all the ills of violent mistreatment of others. In his address on “The Montgomery Story” at the Annual NAACP Convention on 27 June 1956, at San Francisco, he cites the Bible proverb as a metaphorical sign of violence that must be overcome by a philosophy of nonviolence:

From the beginning there has been a basic philosophy undergirding our movement. It is a philosophy of nonviolent resistance. It is a philosophy which simply says we will refuse on a nonviolent basis, to cooperate with the evil of segregation. In our struggle in America we cannot fret with the idea of retaliatory violence. To use the method of violence would be both impractical and immoral. We have neither the instruments nor the techniques of violence, and even if we had it, it would be morally wrong. There is the voice crying [applause], there is a voice crying through the vista of time, saying: “He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword” [Matt. 26:52]. [applause] History is replete with the bleached bones of nations who failed to hear these words of truth, and so we decided to use the method of nonviolence, feeling that violence would not do the job. (Carson et al. 1992–2007, vol. III, p. 305)

But King is equally well versed in the wisdom of folk proverbs. For example, in his stirring address of 23 June 1963, at the “Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall” at Detroit, King cites the modern proverb “Last hired, first fired” (Doyle et al. 2012, p. 121) as an unfortunate truism especially regarding the employment injustice that African Americans face in light of racial discrimination:

We’ve been pushed around so long; we’ve been the victims of lynching mobs so long; we’ve been the victims of economic injustice so long—still the last hired and the first fired all over this nation. And I know the temptation. I can understand from a psychological point of view why some caught up in the clutches of the injustices surrounding them almost respond with bitterness and come to the conclusion that the problem can’t be solved within, and they talk about getting away from it in terms of racial separation. But even though I can understand it psychologically, I must say to you this afternoon that this isn’t the way. Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy. [Applause] And oh, I hope you will allow me to say to you this afternoon that God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race. [Applause] And I believe that with this philosophy and this determined struggle we will be able to go on in the days ahead and transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. (Carson and Shepard 2001, pp. 68–69)

In his constant concern for the progress in the fight for civil rights, King found another proverb to express that there is no easy way or quick fix, namely “No pain, no gain”. King cites the less frequent variant “No gain without pain” in his already mentioned address at the “Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall” (1963) to explain that there is a heavy price to pay (an additional proverbial phrase) for social advancement:

And I do not want to give you the impression that it's going to be easy [to get civil rights]. There can be no great social gain without individual pain. And before the victory for brotherhood is won, some will have to get scarred up a bit. Before the victory is won, some more will be thrown into jail. Before the victory is won, some, like Medgar Evers, may have to face physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children and their white brothers from an eternal psychological death, then nothing can be more redemptive. Before the victory is won, some will be misunderstood and called bad names, but we must go on with a determination and with a faith that this problem can be solved. [Yeah] [Applause]. (Carson and Shepard 2001, pp. 70–71)

What a sociopolitical message based on proverbial wisdom! And King's speeches and writings are filled with such statements, showing once and for all that proverbs are of much relevance and value in humankind's sociopolitical attempt to construct a more humane world.

By his own admission, former President Barack Obama (born 1961) has been deeply influenced by his extensive reading of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, and it might well be conjectured that he read at least Frederick Douglass's autobiography as well. As all of them, he is conscious of his use of language, as can be seen from the exquisite style of his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* (1995). It is replete with proverbial language as are his speeches and other writings that set forth his political agenda. The best educated of his predecessors, he too is well versed in Bible and folk proverbs, using them at key points in his various sociopolitical communications. As such, they become metaphorical expressions of his humane and ethical worldview based on fairness, empathy, and yes, the proverbial golden rule (Mieder 2009b; 2014b, pp. 172–97).

As a matter of fact, in his political and personal manifesto *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama states unequivocally that he is guided by the proverb "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matt. 7:12) that is commonly referred to as the "golden rule" for human conduct. Being well aware of the general knowledge and currency of this law of life expressed either in its longer proverbial form or simply its "golden rule" designation, Barack Obama can assume that his readers or audience will be able to understand and hopefully identify with his subjective statement that "a sense of empathy [. . .] is at the heart of my moral code, and it is how I understand the Golden Rule—not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes" (Obama 2006, p. 66). Always the proverbialist, he is quick to add the two proverbial expressions "to put oneself into somebody else's shoes" and "to see through someone else's eyes" to the not directly stated proverbial law, thereby stressing that this golden rule will only be fulfilled if people have understanding and compassion for each other. Later in this book, he reiterates his personal commitment to this high moral principle: "There are some things that I'm absolutely sure about—the Golden Rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace" (Obama 2006, p. 224).

Not long after his inauguration President Obama undertook a trip abroad to Egypt, Germany, and France. It was on 4 June 2009, at Cairo University, where he gave his major address reaching out to the Muslim world. During this speech Obama argued forcefully "against negative stereotypes of Islam", but he was quick to point out that eradicating the world of stereotypes must involve people everywhere, who, after all, were all created equal, as Obama never tires to point out proverbially:

Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all [men] are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words—within our borders, and around the world. We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: E pluribus unum—"Out of many, one". (Mieder 2014b, pp. 191–92)

The old classical proverb “E pluribus unum” which is part of the American seal embodies Obama’s vision of a world in which people emphasize their similarities rather than stress their differences (Fields 1996, pp. 1–25; Aron 2008, pp. 23–25). And this view includes a democratic form of government, of course, as Obama stresses by citing part of the proverbial triad of a “government of the people, by the people, for the people” that was popularized as the shortest definition of democracy by way of Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” of November 19, 1863, when he had said at the end of his oration: “[. . .] that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (Mieder 2005, pp. 15–55). But here is what Obama said about democracy at Cairo:

There are some who advocate for democracy only when they’re out of power; once in power, they are ruthless in suppressing the rights of others. (Applause.) So no matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who would hold power: You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make a true democracy. (Mieder 2014b, p. 192)

It is not clear why Obama does not cite the third element “for the people” of this proverbial definition, but what he does say surely refers to the fact that the government is there for the people whom it serves! And then, very close to the end of this moving and inspiring speech to thousands of Arabic students, he asked them “to reimagine the world, to remake this world.” Little wonder that there were repeated applause and calls of the type “Barack Obama, we love you!” during the speech. The climax of the speech was reached when the President called for a new world of brother- and sisterhood informed by empathy and mutual respect, with the center of his powerful statement being occupied by the proverbial golden rule once again:

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort—a sustained effort—to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

It’s easier to start wars than to end them. It’s easier to blame others than to look inward. It’s easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There’s one rule that lies at the heart of every religion—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. (Applause.) This truth transcends nations and peoples—a belief that isn’t new; that isn’t black or white or brown; that isn’t Christian or Muslim or Jew. It’s a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. It’s a faith in other people, and it’s what brought me here today. (Mieder 2014b, pp. 192–93)

That is rational and emotional rhetoric, coming both from the mind and the heart, as it calls for a new world based on ethical values that bind humankind together. One certainly can hear echoes of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King in this deeply moral worldview.

Of course, Barack Obama’s oral and written words also include plenty of folk proverbs to underscore the vision of a more humane world order. He usually incorporates them without any introductory formulas into his rhetorical flow so that they in a way become his “own” words of wisdom without coming across like time-worn clichés. He might also add a word or two to break up the formulaic nature of proverbs to lessen the apparent didactic tone while at the same time maintaining the intended deeper message of bringing about positive change. On 7 May 2005, at Rockford, Illinois, he made good use of the proverb “Knowledge is power”:

See, in this new world, knowledge really is power. A new idea can lead not just to a new product or a new job, but [to] entire new industries and a new way of thinking about the world. And so you need to be the Idea Generation. The generation who's always thinking on the cutting edge, who's wondering how to create and keep the next wave of American jobs and American innovations. (Mieder 2009b, p. 82)

At another occasion, on 25 July 2005, at Chicago, he underscored his commitment to health care with the ethical proverb "A promise made is a promise kept":

We'll never rise together if we allow medical bills to swallow family budgets or let people retire penniless after a lifetime of hard work, and so today we must demand that when it comes to commitments made by working men and women on health care and pensions, a promise made is a promise kept. (Mieder 2009b, p. 82)

And here is yet a third example of the encouragement that Obama was able to give graduating students by the use of the proverb "Time will tell" in a speech of 26 June 2006, at Evanston, Illinois:

Time will tell. You will be tested by the challenges of this new century, and at times you will fail. But know that you have it within your power to try. That generations who have come before you faced these same fears and uncertainties in their own time. (Mieder 2009b, p. 82)

He might just as well have spoken of the "audacity of hope" in this last reference, but the simple proverb suffices to encourage his young audience to look with confidence and good will into the future. There is no doubt that President Obama was especially skillful in his sociopolitical employment of proverbial wisdom as valid expressions of moral, ethical, and humane values.

Judging by the writings and speeches of former First Lady, Senator of New York, Secretary of State under Barack Obama, and unsuccessful presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton (born 1947), she would have carried on many of Obama's policies, albeit with a more pragmatic and less idealistic approach. While she certainly does not have the oratorical flare and appeal of her friend Obama, her commitment to sociopolitical issues finds solid expression in her writings where she appears more proverbial than in her too factual speeches that lack emotive warmth. Things are completely different when it comes to the at times passionate and certainly emotional as well as natural style of her three books *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (1996), *Living History* (2003), and *Hard Choices* (2014). The "cool" or "icy" and certainly intellectual Hillary Clinton is perfectly capable of letting her official hair down, to put it proverbially. And yes, her books show Hillary Clinton to be quite the proverbialist (Mieder 2015b).

It comes as no surprise that Hillary Clinton's personal and political ethics are informed by the proverbial golden rule as well. Always interested in the children of the world, Clinton writes: "I wish more churches—and parents—took seriously the teachings of every major religion that we treat one another as each of us would want to be treated. If that happened, we could make significant inroads on the social problems we confront" (Clinton 2003, p. 164). And that people really get the message, she chose Barbara Reynold's aphorism "The Golden Rule does not mean that gold shall rule" (Clinton 2003, p. 265) as a motto for a chapter on "Every Business Is a Family Business" (Clinton 2003, pp. 265–79). After all, it is the humanitarian engagement rather than the mercantile successes that make the world a better place for humankind.

There is a proverbial metaphor that has served Hillary Clinton well on her long and engaged political and social journey. It all has to do with the proverbial title of her extremely successful first book *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (1996) that begins with a chapter also entitled "It Takes a Village" (Clinton 1996, pp. 1–11). A few pages into it, she makes the following comments around the proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" that encapsulates the entire thrust of this book on the raising and educating of children. As can be seen from her remarks, she very astutely incorporates the village with its familial and social structures, traditions, and values as a small place into the nation

as a whole, and beyond that into the world. After all, the child of today is a citizen not only of a particular village or country but of the interconnected world:

Children exist in the world as well as in the family. From the moment they are born, they depend on a host of other “grown-ups”—grandparents, neighbors, teachers, ministers, employers, political leaders, and untold others who touch their lives directly and indirectly. Adults police their streets, monitor the quality of their food, air, and water, produce the programs that appear on their television, run the businesses that employ their parents, and write the laws that protect them. Each of us plays a part in every child’s life: It takes a village to raise a child.

I chose that old African proverb to title this book because it offers a timeless reminder that children will thrive only if their families thrive and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them. [. . .].

In earlier times and places—and until recently in our own country—the “village” meant an actual geographic place where individuals and families lived and worked together. [. . .] For most of us, though, the village doesn’t look like that anymore. [. . .] The horizons of the contemporary village extend well beyond the town line. From the moment we are born, we are exposed to vast numbers of other people and influences through radio, television, newspapers, books, movies, computers, compact discs, cellular phones, and fax machines. Technology connects us to the impersonal global village it has created. [. . .].

The sage who first offered that proverb would undoubtedly be bewildered by what constitutes the modern village. [. . .] The village can no longer be defined as a place on a map, or a list of people or organizations, but its essence remains the same: it is a network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives. (Clinton 1996, pp. 5–7, see also p. 11)

The proverb is not actually of African origin, even though the somewhat similar Swahili proverb “One hand (person) cannot bring up (nurture) a child” has been located (Scheven 1981, p. 123). Rather, it might well have had its start from a statement made by Toni Morrison in 1981 (Mieder 2014b, pp. 201–2; Shapiro 2006, p. 529). The fact that Toni Morrison is a well-known African-American writer, might have led Hillary Clinton erroneously to conclude that she was using an African proverb. Employing it with the introductory formula “that old African proverb” certainly added authoritative expressiveness to her significant sociopolitical comment regarding the life of children.

There is also Clinton’s famous remark “Human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights” (Clinton 2014, p. 585) which has become quotational if not proverbial by now (Foss 1999, p. 124; Bartlett 2012, p. 864). Here is what Hillary Rodham Clinton as an effective advocate for women’s rights worldwide actually said at the end of a powerful anaphora during a major address at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women on 5 September 1995, at Beijing, China:

It is a violation of human rights when babies are denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or their spines broken, simply because they are born girls.

It is a violation of human rights when women and girls are sold into the slavery of prostitution.

It is a violation of human rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death because their marriage dowries are deemed too small.

It is a violation of human rights when individual women are raped in their own communities and when thousands of women are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war.

It is a violation of human rights when a leading cause of death worldwide among women ages 14 to 44 is the violence they are subjected to in their own homes.

It is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation.

It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families, and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will.

If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, it is that human rights are women's rights—and women's rights are human rights. Let us not forget that among those rights are the right to speak freely—and the right to be heard.

Women must enjoy the right to participate fully in the social and political lives of their countries if we want freedom and democracy to thrive and endure. [. . .].

Let this Conference be our—and the world's—call to action. (Clinton 1995, pp. 5–7)

Indeed, her statement about human rights also being women's rights and vice versa deserves to be quoted, remembered, and adhered to as a piece of quintessential wisdom, especially in light of the fact that the world is full of painful misogynous proverbs denying women their equal rights (Kerschen 1998; Schipper 2003). The entire speech showed Clinton's fighting spirit which on a personal level could also be seen in her two attempts to become the first woman president during the presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2016.

Clearly Hillary Clinton is tuned into proverbs, frequently directly calling attention to them with introductory formulas that help to strengthen the proverbial point she wishes to make. In this example she even declares her "love" for a particular proverb! No proverb scholar could ask for more:

There's an old saying I love: You can't roll up your sleeves and get to work if you're still wringing your hands. So, if you, like me, are worrying about our kids; if you, like me, have wondered how we can match our actions to our words, I'd like to share with you some of my convictions I've developed over a lifetime—not only as an advocate and a citizen but as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife—about what children need from us and what we owe to them. (Clinton 1996, p. 10)

No matter what sociopolitical issues she has been fighting for, proper care for children, women's rights, health care, welfare reform, and many others, she has struggled on against all odds and obstacles, being well aware of the modern proverbial truth that "In politics, as in life, the devil is in the details" (Clinton 2003, p. 290).

When Senator Bernie Sanders (born 1941) from Vermont challenged his friend Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination for president in 2016, he put up a valiant fight and came close to defeating her. The reasons for his good showing are many, but one of them is doubtlessly his engaging grass-root rhetoric that excited young people in particular to accept his revolutionary stance as a democratic socialist. His speeches and two books *Outsider in the White House* (2015, updated from 1997) and *Our Revolution. A Future to Believe in* (2016) contain a steady reiteration of his progressive politics that swept the country like a fresh breeze. Since he is unwavering from his socialist agenda, his political message is steadfast and clear with a number of proverbial *leitmotifs* making up his sociopolitical agenda. The tautological proverb "Enough is enough" is his often repeated slogan for his dissatisfaction with the American political status quo in need of a truly revolutionary change:

I believe that Americans, battered by job losses and wage stagnation, angered by inequality and injustice, have come to this understanding [that a political revolution is necessary]. I hear Americans saying loudly and clearly: enough is enough. This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not solely to a handful of billionaires, their super PACs, and their lobbyists. (Sanders 2015, p. vii; Sanders 2016, pp. 117, 136)

With his populist arguments for a more equalitarian government he frequently references the proverbial definition of democracy that includes all people, adding much authority to it by mentioning Abraham Lincoln's use of it:

At the conclusion of his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln stated "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom . . . and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." In the year 2016, with a political campaign finance system that is corrupt and increasingly controlled by billionaires and special interests, I fear very much that, in fact, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" will perish in the United States of America. We cannot allow this to happen. (Sanders 2016, p. 203, see also pp. 81, 187)

Again and again Sanders attacks America's unfortunate move towards an oligarchy with the most inequitable distribution of wealth in the entire world. The proverb "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer" serves him perfectly to add emotive power to his steady warnings:

While the rich get richer, almost everyone else gets poorer; the standard of living of most Americans is in decline; democracy is in crisis, and oligarchy looms; what we know is determined by the corporate media; our health care system is in shambles, our educational system is facing a crisis. (Sanders 2015, p. 274, see also pp. 31, 107)

But here is Sanders's most powerful sociopolitical use of this proverb surrounded by the proverbs "It takes money to make money" to describe the *modus operandi* of billionaires and "You can't have it all" to tell them that their pecuniary greed must come to a stop in a more equitable world order:

Add in a whole slew of other credits and deductions that advantage the wealthy, and a billionaire hedge fund manager can pay a lower effective tax rate than a truck driver, teacher, or nurse. The old adage "It takes money to make money" is alive and well. The tax code is helping the very rich get insanely richer, while the middle class is disappearing and the poor are getting poorer. It is the Robin Hood principle in reverse.

In my view, we have got to send a message to the billionaire class: "You can't have it all." You can't continue getting huge tax breaks by shipping American jobs to China. You can't hide your profits in the Cayman Islands and other tax havens while there are massive unmet needs in every corner of this nation. Your greed has to end. You cannot take advantage of all the benefits of America if you refuse to accept your responsibilities as Americans. We need a tax system that is fair and progressive. (Sanders 2016, pp. 266–67, see also pp. 121, 217, 315, 410)

And here is yet another attack on this grotesque situation, this time warning the nation that the proverbial beginning of the "Declaration of Independence" is in danger of being subverted:

The ideas that all Americans are created equal and that all of us are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were, according to the founders, supposed to be "self-evident truths." But those foundational notions about what this country is supposed to be all about are seriously imperiled by the grotesque level of wealth and income inequality that exists in America today. (Sanders 2016, p. 277, see also p. 186)

Clearly supportive of pay equity for women, Sanders includes a chapter with the proverbial title "Equal pay for equal work" in *Our Revolution* (Sanders 2016, pp. 228–32) that certainly would have earned him the respect and admiration of Susan B. Anthony.

What is so fascinating about Sanders's effective use of proverbs is that they serve as subversive instruments to bring about a change of political power structures that are to a degree maintained

by the authority of traditional proverbs. In his seminal article on “Proverbs and the Politics of Language” (2000) Cameron Louis observes that in politics “proverbs are attempts to give automatic authority and legitimacy to one’s perceptions or advice. When one uses a proverb, one is attempting to invoke self-evident social truths and social norms to support one’s point of view” (Louis 2000, p. 178; Manders 2006). Sanders is well aware of this as he employs proverbs not so much to keep matters as they are but rather to bring about revolutionary social change. And for him also this includes the proverbial golden rule that appears to be fallen by the wayside in light of recent social behavior:

America has always been a haven for the oppressed. We cannot and must not shirk our historic role as a protector of vulnerable people fleeing persecution. We must, as President Lincoln urged in his first inaugural address, appeal to the better angels of our nature. We must treat others as we would like to be treated.

Sadly, in 2016, we had a major party candidate for president spending endless hours doing the exact opposite, appealing to our worst human traits—bigotry and racism. It is way past time to stop peddling hatred for political gain. We need real solutions to the real problems facing our country, including immigration. (Sanders 2016, p. 398, see also pp. 149–50)

Here then is the final proof of the humanistic value of proverbs in sociopolitical discourse. And no, Bernie Sanders is not talking about his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton here but rather about President Donald Trump (born 1946), a perplexing enigma in the proud history of the United States. Having discussed three centuries of proverbs as valued wisdom for proper social behavior, it should be of interest that Trump’s confrontational and ill-conceived rhetoric is void of proverbial language. In fact, he does not even use metaphors that usually permeate verbal and written communication. He is too straight-forward in his length-restricted tweets where there is no room for metaphors and proverbs that would help him to overcome his direct and often insulting language. After all, there is no doubt that the folkloric indirection of proverbs has always carried considerable humanistic value in effective, considerate, and ethical sociopolitical discourse.

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