Leonard Cheshire Project Resonate

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Start of Transcription

00:00:00 Leonard Cheshire: Monday October 19th, Gulfport, Mississippi, talk after the luncheon inaugurating the new home.

00:00:14 LC: Mister President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I’m sure you’ll know that it is a really tremendous pleasure and privilege for me to be here today – the occasion of the real fulfilment of a dream, a dream that started, as we’ve been told…five years ago – four years ago, 1977. And Ernest, when you introduced your blessing and said that really beautiful prayer, you talked about a vision. And I think that of all the things that we need to have in life if we’re going to build our world into the kind of world we want to live in and hand on to those who come after us, it’s a vision that we need. A vision and also a dream. And today, the fifth time that I’ve had the pleasure of standing up and speaking as your guest, and you’ve had the dubious pleasure of listening, I find many friends, old friends, in the room. And if I may say so friends from both the two halves of my life – of my working life – the first, the Air Force, and the second, those from different walks of life who in one way or another have become involved with helping those with handicaps or in one way underprivileged. And if I might, I would just like to say one or two words about the Air Force. I think it’s very necessary that we remember our past, that we remember the debts that we owe to our past, both as individuals, and as nations, and as communities. And I would like today to acknowledge the debt that I owe to my 6 years in the RAF, in the Air Force.

00:02:36 The Air Force – and of course all the three armed forces – taught me, as everybody else, first and foremost discipline. When you go out into life as a young man you don’t always realise the value and the necessity of discipline. The RAF taught me that. It also taught me that if you want to do anything well in life, you have to become totally master of your trade, of your profession. Survival in war of course is largely a matter of chance, a matter for which we have to thank God. But our part is to polish, master, everything that we possibly can. In flying terms, I would say that a wartime, or any operational pilot needs to become so familiar with flying his particular aircraft that no part of his mind is on the business of flying, only on the business of what has to be achieved. I also learned, in the air force, how we all depend one upon another. We are all members of a team, and if one man appears to have stood out and done something exceptional, he knows in his heart that it’s due to the team of which he formed a part. And I don’t mean only the team that is your crew – your aircrew, or your groundcrew, or even your station – the basis, you would call it – but reaching far back across the country to those who built your equipment, to those who are keeping the nation’s life going. I think we need to remember how we are all members of one and the same human family, and that often those who seem to be doing very unimportant, unrecognised jobs, are just as important as the men out in the front line

00:05:09 But the war also taught me what men and women can achieve when they are united in a common purpose and a common goal. I think if ever that needed to be proved, it was proved in World War 2. But also, in a different way, I’ve seen that realised here in Mississippi, and if you’ve heard from two people, Tommy and Bonnie, how the home here started, let me just complete the picture by telling you the stage earlier than either of them mentioned.

00:05:53 I was invited to take part in a conference in Washington – I think it was the White House Conference for Employment of the – Handicapped, was it? And I was fortunate enough to be a member of the high table, and was introduced briefly by the President, who said some nice words – rather nicer than I deserved. And after it, a girl came up to me, and she said, ‘I’m from Mississippi, and if you’d come down to Mississippi next Thursday, I think we could have a Cheshire home down there.’ So I said, ‘Well I have a … I have a schedule’, I said, ‘My next 8 days are all blocked, I can’t suddenly cancel everything and come down to Mississippi!’ But she persisted, and there was something about the way she persisted that made me think, ‘Well, I don’t know, she may mean this.’ So I said, ‘You ring me up tomorrow morning and tell me what you can fix.’ So next morning she rang up, and she said, ‘I fixed for the governor to have you met at Jackson, he will put you up in his own house, he will fly you down to Gulfport, he will chair a meeting in Jackson to discuss a home there, and we have a committee waiting for you down in Missi…– in Gulfport.’ So I said, ‘Well, if she can do that, and if Mississippi can respond in that way, I can reschedule my program.’ That meant in fact, as I had to go back to England, catching Concorde in order to come back and keep the engagement. And today we see the result of all that. I have to say that those I consulted in Washington thought really it wasn’t a very sensible thing to do, why couldn’t we let things be prepared for a year, and then defer it, and come down in a year’s time. But I have to say, Bonnie, that there was something about the way you spoke that just gave me a little hunch you meant it. And you deserve every tribute and every nice word that’s been said about you today. And I’d like to join my thanks to all of those too. Thank you, Bonnie.

00:08:32 This year, as you may know, has been designated International Year of Disabled People. And during this year, we’ve been asked to focus our attention on the needs and the hopes of disabled people and on the response that is needed by us – that’s to say by society as a whole – to give the disabled person his rightful place in society. But this week is also, as it happens, the week of the all-important Mexican summit, in which heads of state are going to be discussing and confronting the great problem of the gap between the underprivileged of the world and the more privileged – what is technically called the North-South dialogue. So perhaps I could…conclude my talk by looking at disability, by making one or two personal observations about it and telling you some of the things that have happened on my way out here to Mississippi.

00:10:05 I think the all-important thing when we confront the problem of disability and consider what ought we to do – the all-important thing – is to remember that we are not talking about ‘the disabled’ as if it were a separate group, we are talking about handicapped or disabled people. And above all, they are people, they are persons like you or me, like everybody, people who just happen to have a disability. Disability itself can take many forms. It can be an impairment of any of our faculties – physical, mental, emotional – but somebody who has no job is disabled, because that person is never able to fulfil his potential. He can find – or she can find – no purpose in life. If we have a severe personality defect, if I, and I don’t deny my personality defects, if you should find that when I stand at the microphone and give a talk, I’m never able to bring it to a conclusion, you would say – I don’t know what the Mississippi term would be, but you would say ‘There’s something the matter with that fellow.’ I’m trying to say that the borderline between disability and non-disability is very fine. We should be very careful before we think that a disabled person is different from ourselves.

00:12:06 What we need to offer as a society, in my opinion, is the opportunity for every disabled person, every handicapped person, to choose the kind of life that he or she wants. That means that we need, as a society, to provide a whole range of differing options of how to live. One person will want to live a highly individual life, on his own, in the community, perhaps in his own apartment, another will find that he or she will find their fulfilment in a community, in a group home. Some will require a great deal of care, their disability weighs so heavily on them they haven’t the energy to take daily decisions, they want somebody else to do that for them. And between those two extremes, a whole range of differing facilities – if you like, like a ladder with different rungs – and our work, in my own Foundation, is just dealing with one small rung on this large ladder. We should never try to talk of ideal solutions in the absolute. Everything that we do should be geared to the particular individual. We should look at him or her and say, ‘What is the life that he or she wants?’ And I’ve been deeply impressed by what I’ve seen on my visit, the day before yesterday, to your home, here on the Gulf Coast.

00:14:05 I was taken in the morning, first to do a little television interview, but that wasn’t as important to me as just being in the home for an hour. I was shown round, and I sat in a corner and I just watched. And what I saw was very familiar. I saw all sorts of people, 6 or 7, each in a different way busy about something. One was raking the sand and sweeping the paths, another was mowing the grass – or the weeds, I’m not quite clear which [audience laughter], Tommy appeared with a truck – I don’t know where you’d picked up [audience laughter] the…iceboxes, but you picked them up – and somehow, sitting there and watching it, seeing a home just come together, made me picture all the different groups of people in other countries, some of them very poor, some wealthy, doing exactly the same thing. And the reason they are doing it, the motive that prompts them, is the knowledge that what they are doing is for another individual person. It’s that personal link, and the personal relationship between the community in which the home is situated that counts, and that I think gives those who live in the home the kind of life that they want, a sense of security, a sense of being wanted, a sense of feeling that their life has a purpose and hope for the future. And I must, with all my heart, pay my tribute to you here on the Gulf Coast who’ve made that possible.

00:16:21 Since Gigi, and I, my daughter, left England 7 weeks ago, we’ve been travelling through Australia and New Zealand before coming here, and we’ve been visiting – apart from opening two homes – we’ve been visiting groups of people who collect money for a large centre we have in India, which is one of the only homes we have that’s not locally financed and supported, for various reasons which make it impossible. There too, despite the distance of 4000 miles that separate the two groups of people, we’re trying to build that personal link, so that it’s not a question of just giving money, but of being personally involved and interested in the home, through sponsorship schemes where the person who gives will sponsor one known little child or leprosy patient, and receive photographs and a life story and so on. And amongst those groups we have a group of prisoners in the maximum-security jail at Pentridge in Melbourne. And those prisoners, nearly all serving a life sentence, raise 2000 dollars a year to send to Raphael. I find that very moving and very inspiring.

00:18:05 Unfortunately, when the little group started, they had a governor, a governor of the jail, who wasn’t very cooperative. Had he been more cooperative, we’d have had no money problems at all. Because the prisoners went to him and said, ‘Sir’ – at least I suppose they said ‘sir’ – ‘If you let us out for three days, we’ll collect enough money to keep that place going forever!’ [audience laughter] But the governor said no.

00:18:44 But the very fact that people who are living in the conditions they are living should be willing to devote part of their time to help others in even greater need does, I think, set us a great example. And that is what I find about all disabled people. The example they set us. First, they set us the example of how to live a purposeful, normal, cheerful life despite having lost so much. And I think if we look into our own lives, we know that we need that example, there are moments when we are so easily knocked off our balance by something that is really nothing at all. But more than that, in the disabled person, by virtue of his relative helplessness – depending of course on the severity of his disability – but in that disabled person, I see reflected the total helplessness of the completely poor of the world. If ever you’ve been to one of the developing countries and seen the very poor, you will know that there’s absolutely nothing they can do to help themselves. They can only sit and wait for somebody to give them either something to eat or – they keep on hoping – the opportunity of pulling themselves up and building a life that has a meaning to it. And I think that this is the great problem that confronts us today.

00:20:46 I think that if we don’t confront this problem, if we don’t go out and show that we really mean to put it right, that we really mean to give the developing countries – forgetting for the moment the complexity of the problem or of its solution, which I don’t deny – if we don’t show that we really are on the side of the underprivileged and that we intend to help them, we cannot hope for a peaceful world. It is bound to erupt one day into revolt and violence. And if we say, ‘How are we going to go about it?’, I would answer, ‘Step by step.’ In our own homes, we started just with one old man, dying of cancer, needing help for 3 or 4 months. I thought that was the only step I was going to take, but it led to others. In our own homes, we are now taking the view, this being International Year of Disabled People, and the year of our international conference, and the year in which Queen Elizabeth, queen of England – of Britain, I beg your pardon – has become our patron, we have taken the view that we should try always to be reaching out further and further and further towards those in need. First, you establish a home and get it going. Then that home, instead of merely looking after itself, begins to say, ‘What can we put back into the community that’s enabled us to come into being?’ And then you reach out further. We’re finding that the established homes are now taking an interest in those in the poor countries. You reach out to those that we so far have never thought of reaching, the disabled person in the rural areas of the developing countries. I see our movement, a series of steps always reaching out a little further.

00:23:22 We can never find the ultimate, absolute solution. Let us find what we can do today, and I feel, in my heart, that Mississippi has something about it, a dynamism, a sense of community feeling, a community spirit, which will lead to this home being not just a home on its own, but one that will set others going throughout your state, and that in its turn, you will look outwards towards those in the greatest need in other countries. I’ve never come here without feeling better and stronger for having been amongst you. Before I came in June, when I had the honour of a few moments with the Queen, she asked me about the overseas homes and I told her in particular about the United States and, even more particularly, about Mississippi. And when I next have the honour of seeing her, I shall be able to tell her that you now have this beautiful new home. So I can only thank you with all my heart both for the warmth of the welcome you’ve given me and for everything that you’ve done in the service of those who need some form of help.

00:25:09 I think it’s my pleasure to – Mary – to introduce you… Would you come and join me? Mary, Mary Brown, who came to help us in Washington when we were at the same sort of stage you were, Bonnie, in 1978, has been with us ever since and is now president of our national foundation. Ever so good of you to come down here today…

00:25:37 Mary Brown: Thank you.

00:25:37 LC: …Mary, and may I give the microphone to you?

00:25:40 MB: For a minute.

00:25:41 LC: A minute? Yeah, I talked too long, sorry…

00:25:42 MB: No you didn’t!

00:25:43 LC: [incomprehensible]

00:25:44: *Speech ends*

00:25:44: *End of recording*

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