

Comments by Roger Des Forges on the commemoration in Delaware Park on
Saturday, October 27, 2012

As some of you may know, Alison was a very fast walker. In fact, when we were in college one of her other suitors remarked that she would probably marry me because I was the only one who could walk as fast as she did! Helene spent many hours walking with Alison in this park so we can infer that she must be a fast walker too!

I want to begin, then, by thanking Helene for her friendship and for organizing this event, one of many she has spearheaded over the last three years as Chair of the Alison L. Des Forges Memorial Committee. I would like to thank Irving Massey who first conceived the idea of dedicating a park bench to Alison's memory and who helped pick out this site. I am also grateful to the other members of the ALD Memorial Fund Committee and to members of the Buffalo community, many of whom are here today, for their generous contributions to the Memorial Fund which have helped make this commemoration and others possible.

For those of you who have not yet seen it, the inscription on the bench reads:

In loving Memory of Dr. Alison L. Des Forges (1942-2009)
Historian of Rwanda, Advocate of Public Education, Defender of Human Rights
Devoted Wife, Mother, Grandmother, Friend
Your Warm and Joyful Spirit Will Stride on Forever

In addition to dedicating this park bench, we are also here today to help plant three trees. One has been contributed by our family, including our son Alexander and daughter Jessie, as the first beneficiaries of Alison's remarkable capacity to care for others. One has been contributed by our friend Helene and her sons Malcolm and Marcus, Helene having, with Alison, devoted much of her career to improving public education in Buffalo. And one has been contributed by our colleague Irving and his daughter Rachel, Irving being an academic who has also been concerned about human rights and who recommended the Red Bud trees we are planting today.

In thinking about what enabled Alison to give so freely and fully to her family, her community, and her profession, I am reminded of two passages in two Chinese texts, *The Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, that were first written down a couple of centuries BCE and became central to the Confucian world view in the twelfth century CE. (The translations are my own, based on those of the Christian missionary James Legge.)

The first passage is in the “The Great Learning.” It reads:

大學

古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國，欲治其國者，先齊其家，欲齊其家者，先修其身，欲修其身者，先正其心，欲正其心者，先誠其意，欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知，在格物。5 格物而後知至，知至，而後意誠，意誠，而後心正，心正，而後身修，身修，而後家齊，家齊，而後國治，國治，而後天下平。6

We who wish to brighten the world with virtue must first govern our states well. To govern our states well, we must order our families. To order our families, we must rectify our hearts and minds, to rectify our hearts and minds we must make our intentions sincere, to make our intentions sincere, we must extend our knowledge, and to extend our knowledge we must investigate things. When we investigate things our knowledge becomes more nearly complete, with knowledge nearly complete our thinking becomes sincere, with our thinking sincere our hearts and minds will be rectified, with our hearts and minds rectified, our selves will be cultivated, with our selves cultivated our families will be ordered, with our families ordered our states will be well governed, and with our states well governed we shall have peace throughout the world.

James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1, pp. 357-59

The second passage is in “The Doctrine of the Mean.” It reads:

中庸

唯天下至誠，為能盡其性，則能盡人之性，能盡人之性，則能盡物之性，能盡物之性，則可以贊天地之化育，可以贊天地之化育，則可以與天地參矣。

Only when we attain a high degree of sincerity in the world can we fully develop our nature. Able to develop our nature to the full, we can do the same for other people, able to develop other people's natures to the full, we can develop the natures of other things to the full, able to develop the natures of other things to the full, we can participate in the transforming and nourishing powers of heaven and earth, and able to participate in the transforming and nourishing powers of heaven and earth we can join with heaven and earth as a triad. Stanza 20.

(Ibid., pp. 415-416.)

Although I do not recall ever discussing these passages with Alison, I think that they describe quite well the path toward sagehood along which she walked as far as anyone else I have ever known. If the three trees we are planting here today can in some small way represent Alison's extraordinary contributions to family, friends, and colleagues, so the larger trees behind us might stand for the national and world stages on which she also played important roles. The vista in front of us, then, can be seen to include the heaven and earth within which we are all living out our lives, seeking to perfect our human nature through service to others.

On behalf of our family, I thank you all for coming out on this rainy day to join in celebrating Alison's exemplary life and her immortal spirit.