Cathy Johnson

Topical Seminar – The Power of Ideas

October 8, 2025

Introspection

 In 1917 Anabaptist conscientious objectors were persecuted and tortured for refusing to wear military uniforms or to serve in combat roles. Although they registered for the draft and agreed to serve in non-combatant roles, the pacifists were sent to Leavenworth Prison where they were hanged by their hands until they died. After death, their bodies were returned to their families dressed in full uniform. What impressed me about this story was the source of inner strength that motivated the pacifists to stand by their conviction despite torture and death. That same source of power led Socrates to die by the unjust laws of Athens. And it was the same inner source that guided Martin Luther King, Jr. “to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood” (King 1963).

 Likewise, on September 24, 2025, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, addressed the United Nations by reminding its members that eighty years ago, “from the ashes of war, the world planted a seed of hope. One Charter, one vision, one promise: that peace is possible when humanity stands together." The Secretary General recalled that his youth in Portugal was spent “in the darkness of dictatorship, where fear silenced voices and hope was nearly crushed. Yet, even in the bleakest hours—especially then”—the Secretary General discovered a power that “does not reside in the hands of those who dominate or divide. Real power” he said, resides within the people, “from our shared resolve to uphold dignity, to defend equality, to believe—fiercely—in our common humanity, and the potential of every human being.”

 As individuals and as a nation, we are in crisis. We need to examine what Plato called the greatest evil, a city that that tears itself “apart and makes it many instead of one” (Edelstein 28). Plato believed that in order to understand the physical world we need to first comprehend the universal ideas. For me this involves introspection. It means relying on inner vision to reach common ground, restore the human dignity of all people in our public conscience. We need to communicate with each other to discover that, as Jimmy Kimmel said, politicians and media are trying to tear us apart. And we need to restore the inherent human dignity.

Works Cited

Edelstein, Dan. *The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin* (p. 35). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition. of justice, knowledge, beauty and truth.

Guterres, António, Secretary-General Guterres. United Nations General Assembly Debate. September 24, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/high-level-week-2025>

<https://gadebate.un.org/en/80/secretary-general-united-nations>

King, Martin Luther, Jr. Letters from a Birmingham Jail. April 16, 1963. Birmingham, Alabama.

 https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/\_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf