Since the 1940s, human rights have been proclaimed for everyone regardless of citizenship status. Human rights protections have moved—in part—to the international plane. The UDHR, the Genocide Convention, international tribunals, the ICC—all the measures and conventions and resolutions discussed above infringe on the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state. Thankfully so. Anything that moves the conception and enforcement of human rights to the international level moves us beyond the nation-state as the sole enforcer (and violator) of rights, and that is progress.

The nation-state remains; so do our identities as individuals of particular nationalities, ethnicities, religions (or the lack thereof), and genders. The Enlightenment fiction of an abstract individual, stripped of all markers, is just that—a fiction. A system of human rights built on that understanding will always be flawed and easily subject to attack by the herals of an exclusive, supposedly timeless culture of nation or race or of the essential differences between men and women. Yet diversity of all sorts is the intractable reality of human existence. How we live with that difference is the critical issue. Those who somehow differ from a dominant group may be subordinated, driven out, or killed, or they may be recognized as fellow humans and accorded the same rights as everyone else—without being required to dispense with their identities.53

For all the partial advances, for all the contradictions, all the sheer opposition—human rights remain our best hope for the future. Their advocates sometimes espouse utopian aspirations. A restrained perspective is more appropriate and effective. Human rights will never be implemented in the all-embracing fashion of declarations like the UDHR; they will always face opponents, some quite strong. Yet human rights provide a powerful affirmation of the human spirit. They require that people be respected and afforded recognition no matter what their specific gender, nationality, or race. They demand that all people have access to the basic necessities of life, and have the freedom to express themselves, to work and build and create as they wish, to join with others as they desire, and to be free of the scourge of violence and forced displacement. Those are our fundamental human rights. We should demand nothing less from the worlds we inhabit.