



The international hypocrisy and the human rights according to a popular political science professor of St Petersburg

Dr William Felice talks about his passion for teaching, human rights and his coming retirement this month.



Dr. William Felice was named the Florida Professor of 2006 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [UNKNOWN | Photo: Courtesy]

By **Philip Morgan**

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Dr. William Felice, a popular political science professor at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, is set to retire May 23 after 26 years at the school. He has written six books on human rights and ethics in international relations. In 2006 he was named the Florida Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Felice, 70, talked with the *Tampa Bay Times* about what he sees as progress in global human rights; the joy of teaching; his own health scare; and the importance of a liberal arts education.

How did you get interested in human rights?

I first became interested in human rights in college, back in the '70s. I think it was during the Vietnam War, and the Black student movement (that) was happening there (the University of Washington).

But then when I graduated from college I spent a year in Latin America. I was really exposed to issues of human rights violations across the spectrum, including economic human rights and seeing poverty first-hand in the favelas, shanty towns surrounding Bogotá and different cities in Latin America, and that really impacted my journey. So when I came back from Latin America I decided to work on human rights issues, focusing on Latin America to begin with it. But then I ended up representing a non-governmental human rights organization on people's rights, indigenous people's rights, at the United Nations in New York... a non-profit lobbying type organization.

How is the world doing in ensuring human rights contained in the 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

I think that overall we are moving forward. ... It goes forward and backwards though different cycles... but I do see progress happening. Maybe those are my rose-tinted glasses when I look out at the world, but when I look at – in terms of economic and social issues, just life expectancy around the world, education levels of girls and boys around the world, sanitation levels, access to food, all of that has gone up. There are tremendous obstacles and tremendous suffering... that we need to address, but overall, the progress is impressive.

I think unfortunately we do see a regression in the last 10 years against various civil and political rights. But the rise of autocratic and anti-democratic governments has emerged, this jingoistic nationalism has emerged. That has led to tremendous friction and the denial of basic human rights and human dignity to so many groups.

So we're in a period where civil and political rights now are threatened in a way that I never thought I would see in my lifetime. ... And in terms of the United States, of course, I think that is true as well. We're more polarized now... than we've been for a long time and our democracy is under threat. Its safety is endangered, so I think that's a real human rights priority at home... shoring up our basic democracy.



Students holding professor William Felice up at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2007. [Photo: Courtesy]

How do you think the United States is doing on human rights?

I think in terms of international relations, the United States has unfortunately not been in the leadership role that we could have been. We acted hypocritical and practiced a double standard, and it's evolved at different points. During the Cold War the double standard was around. It was called the Kirkpatrick Doctrine, where we overlooked the human rights violations of the sort of right-leaning autocratic dictatorships that supported our foreign policy in the Cold War. Governments like Marcos in the Philippines or Somoza in Nicaragua, the Shah in Iran, and then really criticized dictatorships of the left.

During the Bill Clinton era, we practiced hypocrisy with sort of overlooking the human rights violations of geopolitical and economically powerful countries that could help our economic globalization project, China being the clearest example. And then during the Bush years – George W. Bush – the hypocrisy was around the war on terror; you were with us or against us. If you were with us we then overlooked your human rights violations. I think that weakens us, our global standing. We look like hypocrites. if we practiced what we preached we'd be a country nations want to follow much more.

What countries are doing the best job at present?

I think in international politics the Scandinavian countries have been really the most consistent in their human rights approach across the board. And so they punch above their weight; they have more influence in global politics because people respect them for that. They don't have to call people to follow them, they don't have to force them to follow their leads. ... If we did that it would enhance our power in the world by far.

What's it going to be like retiring after all these years at Eckerd?

It's going to be hard ... Teaching has been my passion and it has been so rewarding in fundamental ways. It's been a privilege really to be a teacher and a joy to come to work. ... So that's going to be tough. But I do think it's time. I don't want to die at my desk. ...

I do intend to stay on top of my field and I do intend to continue writing, probably more popular type writing, less academic. Figuring that out will be a challenge but I think it will be pretty interesting, too.

You came close to dying in 2019 and wrote an article about it for the Times. What happened?

I started getting headaches – you know, everyone gets headaches – but I didn't really worry about it, and they just continually got worse to the point where I went to the doctor and he immediately sent me to (get) a brain scan. And there was bleeding on both sides of the brain. I was...operated on within 48 hours and it saved my life.

It did leave these dents in my head which initially – it's very hard when your physical appearance changes. And now it's been a year and a half later and I'm much more comfortable with it. The students have been great. Eckerd's been great. My friends have been great. I don't even think about it most of the time anymore.



After more than 30 years teaching and a brain surgery that change his appearance in 2019, Dr William Felice is set to retire this month. [Photo: Courtesy]

How important is a liberal arts education?

I think a liberal arts education is critical to functioning in our democracy. A liberal arts education teaches students critical thinking. It teaches students the ability to separate out demagoguery from reasoned argument. It teaches students to be able to function fully in our society as responsible citizens. And I think that, right at this moment in our history, actually, could not be more important.

William Felice can be reached via his website williamfelice.com.