I’ve never been accused of being knowingly imaginative, so I thought that perhaps a good place to start in a conference such as this would be with the famous line from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* when Milan Kundera’s character Mirek asserts that "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

Of course the matter of remembering is never a straightforward one as Kundera illustrates with Mirek’s story, where, for all his protestations of commitment to memory, Mirek strives to eradicate evidence of a youthful affair that he now, for rather shallow reasons finds embarrassing, and where his rash efforts to diligently record political events since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia results with himself, his son and his friends in prison.

Recording history, including the struggle for human rights, is a comparably fraught affair, frequently as messy and contentious as the struggle for human rights itself. And the misremembering of events can itself be a motivating factor in the perpetuation of human rights abuses.
I think that it is important to note from the outset that, generally speaking, the advances in the struggle for human rights are not achieved as part of a global struggle but as an accumulation of numberless local and national struggles waged by flawed human beings for a plurality of, often self-contradictory, reasons.

Timothy Snyder in his book *Bloodlands* reminds us of one of the incontrovertible heroes of the Second World War, Tuvia Bielski. Many of you will be familiar with part of his story from the movie *Defiance*, in which he was portrayed by Daniel Craig.

Bielski was, with his brothers, responsible for saving hundreds of Jewish lives in what is now Belarus. To help him do this he established an alliance with Soviet partisans who were also fighting the Nazis in the same area. Ultimately however this alliance meant that Bielski, a former Polish soldier, was required as part of the Red Army to be directly involved in the suppression of Polish democracy by the invading Soviets in 1944, something not depicted in the film *Defiance*.

The pattern of a hero of one part of the struggle for human rights conducting themselves in a less noble fashion in another part of that struggle is not isolated because it is human.

Another uncontested hero of the twentieth century, this time in the struggle against Soviet authoritarianism, was Yelena Bonner, who along with her husband Andrei Sakharov resisted with, for me, unimaginable moral and physical courage over decades.
A few years ago I attended a human rights conference in Oslo where a message from her was read. The substance of the message related to a repudiation of Palestinian refugees’ right to return to their former homes in what is now Israel.

I do not want to get into the politics of that particular issue in the bargaining for a just peace settlement in the Middle East, but the substance of the address did strike me as deeply lacking in empathy for the plight of others. This is perhaps understandable in the context of the history of post 1939 Europe, but it is still a sobering reminder of how narrow the perspectives of even the bravest can become.

This is important because the limitation of sympathy with the aspirations or humanity of others can come to undermine human rights. When I was a student in Belfast in the 1980s one sterile debate that would repeatedly be played out was the one entitled “Whose fault it is!” It was wholly possible for seasoned participants to range over 900 years of Irish history in an effort to demonstrate conclusively, at least to themselves, that all the bloodshed and violence that was then occurring was the fault of the other side. Often however it was only necessary to reference the last atrocity of that other side to find sufficient justification for the next atrocity of this side.

I have always held that the violence in the North of Ireland was a product of an unjust political system which routinely violated the civil and human rights of large swathes of the population. But it is important to remember that the privileging of the injustices visited on one’s own community to the exclusion of recognizing the humanity of the
other can enable the routine inflicting of atrocity on other human beings. Whenever the universality of human rights is set aside in the name of a struggle for the security or freedom of a particular community or nation there is a great risk that that struggle is already lost. At the very least it is deeply tarnished and the emergent society may be scarred for generations.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the marked self-centredness that we can discern when we look closely at many struggles for security and justice for particular marginalized communities, and for much of the narrowness of perspective and limitation of sympathy of the participants, is that the participants themselves may feel highly isolated in their struggles.

The activists who risk life and limb to end bonded and forced labour across South Asia today may be aware that most human rights and development actors in the Western world believe that the very slavery those activists are still struggling against was ended hundreds of years ago, as a recent Christian Aid advertising campaign asserted.

However they certainly will be aware that few today beyond their own directly affected communities are remotely interested in trying to end these modern forms of slavery. This toleration of contemporary slavery provides cheap bricks for construction across the region, attractive natural stone for the kitchens and bathrooms of Europe, and cheap clothes for sale on European and North American high streets. So extensive still is the use of the forced labour of girls and young women in garment manufacture in southern India,
not to mention the forced child labour in cotton production in central Asia, that the probability is that every one of us in this room is wearing at least one garment that is tainted with contemporary slavery.

Just to give one illustration of what that means: In the course of a piece of research Anti-Slavery International conducted into the forced labour of girls and young women in the garment sector of the state of Tamil Nadu in Southern India we spoke to the mother of one young woman who worked in a cotton spinning mill there. She described visiting her daughter:

“I spoke to her in a room provided for visitors”, she said, “because visitors are not allowed to go inside the mill or hostel. My daughter told me that she was suffering with fever and vomiting often. ...I met with the manager and requested him to give leave to my daughter because she was unwell. I told him that I would send my daughter back once she was better. But the manager refused saying that there was a shortage of workers therefore they cannot grant leave. He also assured me that they would take care of my daughter and asked me not to worry.”

A week later she received word that her daughter was dead. She was only 20 years old.

The Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal parameters of Slavery¹ note that:

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¹ Drawn up by a network of academics and activists under the leadership of Prof Jean Allain, of the Human Rights Centre at Queen’s University Belfast to provide greater explication of the definition of slavery in the 1926 Slavery Convention which reads: ’Slavery is the status or
“Mistreatment or neglect of a person may provide evidence of slavery... [it] may lead to the physical or psychological exhaustion of a person, and ultimately to his or her destruction; accordingly the act of bringing about such exhaustion will be an act of slavery.

“Evidence of such mistreatment or neglect may include... the imposition of physical demands that severely curtail the capacity of the human body to sustain itself or function effectively.”

Hence when we use the term "slavery" to describe the conditions in many of the spinning mills that produce garments for our high streets, we use that term after much consideration, and in the face of a refusal of many garment retailers who want to be seen as ethical to recognize the facts of the case as such.

Forgetting can have great commercial value.

But it can also bring huge social risks.

One of my colleagues in Anti-Slavery who did doctoral work on bonded labour in Nepal found that it was a significant factor in the Maoist insurrection in that country. Poor bonded labourers saw no other way out of their predicament other than violent

condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised;
insurrection to try to establish a new social order. Hence they were prepared to take up arms.

There are indications that the pattern is being repeated today in India with the Naxalite insurrection drawing support from the landless and the enslaved. The rest of the world is in a poor moral position to criticize their choices as we stand idly by in the deluded belief that the violence of slavery is a thing of the past. Consequently it is substantially unrecognized in the trade and aid policies of Western governments and in the domestic policies of many of the countries most affected by contemporary forms of slavery. Furthermore few international development or anti-poverty organizations prioritize or even recognize the risk of slavery in the communities they work amongst. Hence they run the risk that their interventions either relatively or absolutely exacerbate the position of the most vulnerable groups in those communities.

Forgetting the realities of contemporary slavery helps maintain the violence of the status quo and threatens further considerable risk of insurrectionary violence for vulnerable communities and future generations.

To counter this there is clearly a global need for a comprehensive programme of human, civil and economic rights for those most discriminated against and most vulnerable to slavery. This would offer a chance of peace and prosperity for them, their families and their countries rather than the continued violence of forced labour and poverty that describes their present, not to mention the risks to their futures.
Part of this programme would include extending protections for domestic workers, particularly migrant domestic workers, who travel the world to work in the hope of a better life for themselves and their families. Unfortunately too often they find themselves abused and enslaved.

I spoke last week to a friend who worked on forced labour in the Middle East. He told of how the Indonesian government had banned the travel of Indonesian women to Saudi Arabia for domestic work following the execution of an Indonesian maid by the Saudi state. “Can you imagine”, he asked, “the level of abuse that poor woman, from one of the gentlest and most hospitable communities in the world, must have undergone to drive her, if guilty, to an act that would be subject to the death penalty?”

Saudi Arabia is now prioritising the recruitment of Kenyan and Ethiopian domestic workers to fill the gap left by Indonesia and other countries wary at the systematised abuse of domestic workers in Saudi.

Interestingly in the UK the current Foreign Secretary is a biographer of Wilberforce, yet he has done little to address the issue of slavery amongst the migrant domestic workers of the diplomatic corps. The UK government has also removed the right of domestic workers to change employers, hence de facto facilitating forced domestic labour in this country. And further the UK government, along with the government of Sudan, refused to support a new international convention on decent work for domestic workers at the
International Labour Conference. It is disappointing to have to point out to the UK government that if they are on the same side as the government of Sudan on a human rights issue, they are probably on the wrong side.

It is a great honour to be here today and to have the opportunity to speak to professionals who bear a responsibility for recording ordinary people’s struggles for human rights down the decades and across the globe.

It is fitting that this conference should be held in the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. As you know 200 years ago people like Equiano and Clarkson and thousands of others in this part of the world, and Sam Sharpe, Nat Turner, Touissant, and the Maroons in the Americas decided, for diverse reasons, to try to end slavery, so morally repugnant did they find it. In doing so they took on a system that the writer Adam Hochschild has compared in the equivalence of its power to the oil industry today. In ending the slave trade through force of arms and force of argument in a mere 20 years they showed what could be achieved when there is the will and the audacity of ambition to do so.

Clarkson, Equiano, Turner and Sharpe, the Maroons, the Quakers and the nascent trades unions have been substantially written out of the history of this struggle first by Wilberforce’s sons and largely forgotten subsequently. That historiographical injustice contributes not just to the misremembering of what happened, but the misunderstanding of why it happened. This was a classic example, in Bobby
Kennedy’s phrase, of numberless diverse acts of courage and belief shaping the history of the time: Thus has it been, thus will it always be.

So students of history and human rights, and institutions like the International Slavery Museum, continue to have a critically important function in reminding citizens of that and of their responsibilities to ensure that the gains of the past are maintained and built upon.

Professionals historians and curators of human rights museums and students of history and human rights have a responsibility to remind people that the while each struggle for human rights may be unique in its own way, it is part of a broader struggle for all.

Professionals historians and curators of human rights museums and students of history and human rights have a responsibility to remind people that the successes of the past do not represent the end of struggle, but merely milestones in a longer struggle that must be waged constantly lest the gains made be lost.

Professionals historians and curators of human rights museums and students of history and human rights have the responsibility to remind the world that there are still those who are sweating in the struggle for human rights today and that they must not be left isolated and alone in their efforts.
And all citizens, like all of us here have the responsibility to remember and to show that when we act with common purpose, with all our flaws and diverse motives, that still, together, we can overcome.