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A World in Transition

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Confluence -- a Time of Paradoxes

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the Season of Light, it was the Season of Darkness, it was the Spring of Hope, it was the Winter of Despair."

With these words Charles Dickens summarized the panorama of life of ordinary people amidst the revolutionary waves of change that were sweeping through Paris and London two hundred years ago but his description in A Tale of Two Cities can also serve as an accurate portrayal of scenes presently being played out on the world stage.

The aims of ensuring a meaningful life for all, the fulfilment of their needs and the integration of society are far from new. People have been striving for such objectives for many years and they are all described in some detail in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international documents. The significance of the World Summit for Social Development does not then lie in its content. Its importance derives instead from the global context in which it is being held and the changing consciousness of and attitudes towards living standards and the quality of life. It is calling on the global community to make a commitment to act responsibly. If no such commitment is made the Summit is likely to be seen as no more than another hollow voice in the wilderness.

The Cold War, thankfully, was not waged with missiles so much as with ideologies, attitudes and beliefs and the collapse of manipulative, repressive systems, culminating more than just symbolically in the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, owes more to a mass popular shift in consciousness than to any one decision, action or event or the instigation of any single individual. It was the human spirit and conscience, rather than military force, which triumphed over inhuman ways. Converging with this cumulative assertion of the rights of the human person, and increasing worldwide concern amongst citizens' groups, communities and individuals about personal, social and environmental issues, there has been a noticeable progression in the approach taken in international fora.

A Resounding Echo

The World Summit for Children in 1990 brought to the fore the plight faced by many children and families world-wide and to this effect 71 Presidents and Prime Ministers

made a promise to give every child a better future. The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children states: "The children of the world are innocent, vulnerable and dependent. They are also curious, active and full of hope. Their future should be shaped in harmony and cooperation. Their lives should be mature, as they broaden their perspectives and gain new experiences."

Two years later, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development underscored the position of humanity in its triangular relationship with the natural world and development. Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration proclaims that "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." The desirability of all concerned citizens participating in environmental and development issues was asserted, with the overall aim being harmony with the natural world rather than domination. Significantly, in addition to governmental participation, there was also considerable involvement on the part of other sectors of civil society in many different events world-wide inspired by the Summit.

1992 also witnessed the first Summit meeting of the Security Council at the level of Heads of State and Government to strengthen its commitment to fulfill the great purpose of the United Nations Charter and to enhance its capacity to accomplish the people's hopes through a unified approach. The Secretary-General was asked to prepare a comprehensive report which took the form of The Agenda for Peace.

With the deliberations at Rio having reiterated human beings' rights in relation to development and the environment, the World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna the following year, affirmed that "all human rights derive from the dignity and worth inherent in the human person" and that the human person, as the central subject of human rights and fundamental freedoms, should be the principal beneficiary of them and participate actively in their realization. The Vienna Declaration continued, to state that "human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birthright of all human beings."

In 1993 another unique international gathering took place: the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago. The Declaration towards a Global Ethic, that was released by the Parliament, makes it clear that richly varying traditions and beliefs need not be incompatible with commonly held fundamental principles and aspirations. A core conviction that emerged from the discussions among the representatives of scores of religions and spiritual organizations was that every human being possesses inalienable worth and is entitled to be treated accordingly.

During the International Year of the Family, 1994, at the International Conference on Population and Development held at Cairo, a shift of emphasis also took place, away from population control and towards sustainable development. The central role of the family was stressed and the Programme of Action that was adopted places women at the top of the agenda in the broader fields of economic and political empowerment, highlighting the need for them to have greater control of their lives.

The 4th World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in September 1995, will mobilize women and men at the level both of governments and other sectors of civil society to determine key priorities which need to be addressed in relation to the enhancement of the quality of life.

Amongst the many conclusions that may be drawn from these gatherings there are two discernible and connected trends. The first is the placing of more emphasis on the well-being of the human person as a being endowed with inherent and inalienable dignity and

worth, and therefore also on human and moral values. The second is the increasing acceptance of the right of, and need for, ordinary people to participate in global affairs.

Emerging Values and Grassroots Globalism

This international emphasis on basic human values and rights, universal values and core values, and the increasing involvement of people in development activities, together constitute the main conditions favourable for social progress. Fundamentally conflicting social, political and economic theories and systems have yielded to a general endorsement of a democratic approach and the need to invest in people's welfare and education and the basis of their livelihood. Growing individual involvement in more democratic societies, heightened awareness of human rights and increasing concern about global concerns, are significant steps towards social progress and development. On a more localized basis, these trends are mirrored in popular concern for a better quality of life based on human, moral and spiritual values, a sense of purpose and meaning, care for others and the natural world and a generally more holistic approach. Sophisticated economic and technological globalism is being complemented by people-centred grassroots globalism.

The achievements of the last one hundred years have crossed many frontiers but the world remains threatened by numerous interconnected problems. With the state of affairs in the world at large changing more and more rapidly, and having an ever-greater impact on the personal life of the individual, many people are increasingly reasserting their power of choice. They are no longer prepared to let their future be decided for them nor are they willing to see individual identity, relevance and competence being continuously eroded and their potential short-changed. Instead they are becoming progressively active in regaining responsibility for choosing the direction of their own lives. They want to participate fully and freely in the decisions affecting the way they live and to be allowed to make choices in accordance with their own priorities, aspirations and circumstances. There is the awareness that as members of an interconnected global community, the way of thinking and way of life of each individual inevitably has an influence or effect, even if too small to be perceived, on the overall state of affairs of the world. Boundary lines around the world are dissolving,and with them, the boundaries of our minds.

A Time for Change

These encouraging signposts towards a better tomorrow are sharply contrasted however, by a barrage of interconnected problems. Almost each day brings ever-grosser manifestations of abuse, exploitation, greed, violence, corruption, deprivation, conflict, exclusion, injustice, intolerance, an obsession with materialistic self-gratification counterpointed by indifference to the welfare of others, disregard for anything beyond the immediately present and an overall cheapening of human life. National and social instability has led to a massive sense of personal insecurity. There is now a crisis in the moral fabric of society - a crisis of values - which is increasingly reflected in the poor functioning of many of the fundamental building blocks of society, and general social breakdown.

These two sets of conditions exist side by side in today's world and each is becoming more pronounced. This highlights the fact that society is never static and that the changes that take place in society inevitably involve a process, and one that is often lengthy. The two extremes have not yet fully confronted each other or collided but as each gain in strength and influence an encounter seems imminent - bringing with it the potential for major and beneficial social transformation.

The international Conferences and Summits of the past few years all represent segments of the process of positive change. The ever more present threats, dangers and uncertainties

regarding the future of humanity demand that we reassess our aims and aspirations and identify how that process of change can be at once deepened, quickened and made more durable.

Improved means of communication and travel, and an increase in the flow and exchange of ideas, goods and capital, have reinforced, on a physical level, globalization - the interconnectedness of all parts that comprise the whole of life on earth and the identification with underlying fundamental commonalities, notwithstanding obvious diversity in culture, behaviour and lifestyles.

Just as change is an inevitable facet of the drama of life's shifting scenes so too is the hope and desire for improvement, growth and progress. Many individuals and organizations, perhaps foremost amongst them those of the United Nations' family, have long been concerned with the betterment of the human condition. However, the approaches and actions taken have often been separate, fragmented and sectoral and so lacking in a spirit of mutual support and cooperation. An integrated across-the-board approach to development in now the only way forward.

As the common element in all these endeavours is humanity, and the ultimate aim an improvement in human well-being, increased emphasis on the human person is to be welcomed. The principle of the worth of the individual is an absolute that cannot be diluted when applied to any of the individual facets or dimensions of life, be they social, political, economic or other, that together make up its totality. It is as though attention so far has been focused on nurturing individual leaves of a tree - usually to the exclusion of other leaves - whereas to care for the seed would be to care for the core of all leaves. The leaves constitute the wonderfully diverse panorama of human life, endeavour and achievements, extended throughout many different cultures, disciplines and forms by centuries of growth, whereas the seed represents the human soul and it is to this that we must now direct our attention.

The dire and inhuman conditions now affecting so many men, women and children demand of the majority of humanity a renaissance of human, moral and spiritual values and principles if any real change in attitudes and behaviour is to be achieved. For those already committed to social and humanitarian endeavours, the gradual evolution in consciousness regarding the means and method of achieving long-cherished objectives has now led us to the threshold of an approach in which the human spirit occupies centre-stage. The spirit is the core of our being and universal spiritual values must be at the core of human and social development. Social development can only ever take place as a consequence of inner development.

Attitudes have already shifted away from ideology and towards a more pragmatic, inclusive and accepting approach but our perceptions of humanity and the world around us must allow us to understand and grasp deeper, spiritual aspects of world events if we are to make the right choices. An increasing population and delicate ecosystem only make the call for action more urgent.

We know what we want to do, we can see what we need to do but have we yet understood how to do it? Old notions and methods of working clearly need to be altered, or replaced with new methods. The success of the Summit will thus lie in identifying and articulating different and more effective methods of achieving higher standards of living, progress and development for all.

In short, a new course must be charted for humanity in its journey towards a future that is threatened by uncertainty and danger, but is also full of promise and potential.

The Worth of the Individual

The faculties available to any human being irrespective of his or her place of birth are the mind, heart and spirit in addition to physical abilities, skills and talents. Self-awareness, ethics, insight, language and responsibility characterize all human beings and distinguish them from other species. Throughout time, philosophers have affirmed that, stepping beyond the limitations of the egocentric self, an individual can discover a deeper aspect of the self. With this discovery comes an understanding of the worth inherent in the human person.

A person who really understands his or her own inherent worth and that of others will come to know that worth is not something that is given by the world but comes from a source that transcends all that is physical. Religions do not give worth - they simply remind people of what is true of everyone. Declarations, conventions and other legal documents highlight the importance of the worth of the individual but cannot confer this. The ways in which society works today often seem to conspire against the individual really knowing himself or herself as one who is naturally endowed with worth and suggest that it has to be earned or, for example, that society gives or accords this worth only to those who are wealthy or occupy a position of authority. In reality, every individual has the right to know that worth is inherent in what it means to be a human being; and all individuals have the responsibility of seeing that this right is affirmed and given expression.

Thinking is one of the most fundamental characteristics of human life. However, having recognized this ability we must also recognize that we have the responsibility of deciding what type or quality of thoughts to create. This is important because thoughts are the basis of ideas, concepts, policies and actions, which in turn define the nature of the systems and structures that influence the pattern of world events.

For many of the world's inhabitants the coming years are likely to be marked by poverty, unemployment, other fundamental deprivations and social disorder. The harsh realities confronting humanity cannot be ignored. However, even under the most dire conditions, and in a situation that may seem hopeless, there are examples of how the human spirit is capable of bringing forth a ray of hope.

Human beings are born with a tremendous potential, but without self-worth this potential can never really be realized to the full - either individually or in terms of their place in the wider world. People who are accurately aware of their own qualities and abilities are able to play an important role no matter where they happen to be. Therefore to bring about a better world, individuals must firstly realize their worth and secondly never compromise it. To keep that worth as a priority in one's life and to be true it and its accompanying values can be called integrity - a way of behaviour based upon an inner conviction and commitment to fundamental human values.

Self-worth and integrity are necessary in making the best and right choices on the basis of a moral and ethical understanding of life, and should be maintained no matter what the circumstances may be. Not to respect oneself and others is to call into question the value of life itself.

Rather than really knowing themselves and their own qualities, people often base their sense of identity on their interactions with others. This results in a perception of the self based upon the way they would like to be seen by others or the way they think others see them. It is therefore no surprise that many people base their identity on factors such as their occupation, etiquette, dress, nationality, colour, sex, age, social status, ideologies and wealth. As these factors are to some extent transitory such a sense of identity requires

continual maintenance, nurturing and protection. Much energy is then devoted to establishing and defending this identity and life becomes an external search for the reinforcement of personal self-esteem, too often overlooking the fundamental goodness that exists in every human being.

There is so much in this world that contradicts the notion of self-esteem that people are in danger of losing its essence and meaning. Self-esteem can help individuals avoid, on the one hand, fatalistic self-victimization and, on the other, becoming well fed sufferers or the pathetic prisoners of ephemeral achievements. The middle course between these two extremes is a dignified way of life that reflects and supports self-worth but is not the basis of it.

Human dignity is the external expression of an internal state of self-worth. If people identify more with their external conditions or roles they will inevitably feel inferior or superior to others and so lack an authentic self-respect. Every person who is aware of what it means to be a human being will feel a natural right to live in dignity with all basic needs and human rights fulfilled. He or she may be forced to suffer oppression or degrading living conditions but internally will never accept them. The awareness of this right can give strength and hope to help overcome such indignities as unemployment, poverty and the loss of liberty or opportunities.

A deep and stable foundation for unity and equity can be derived from a perception of the universality of human worth - our common identity as human beings - before which differences of skin colour, culture or language are superficial. Human rights, in all their forms, are universal, indivisible and interrelated and at this level of its identity so is humanity.

The Reintegration of Society

Humans are social beings and society is comprised of individuals. Throughout generations, human beings have inevitably always lived together, grouped initially by family connection and then linked by other ties or interests. Such groupings, or communities, are important for every human being and ultimately all of us belong to the global community. They give a sense of belonging: a human environment in which to express oneself, interact and grow.

Communities may evolve or be formed for different reasons, but whatever the reasons, the purpose of a community is to serve human needs. Normally, the parameters in which a community is formed will be such that the community will contain people who have differences on at least one level, be it age, nationality, ideology, culture or profession. On the other hand, it is also true that all these differences can be transcended by acknowledging the common denominator of the human worth of every individual. This is the foundation upon which the real strength of the community can be built. The more superficial aspects of commonality or like-mindedness are valid reasons for the formation of a community and it is the natural propensity of every individual to find and enjoy those aspects of his or her nature or physical circumstances that are shared with others but these factors are not the ultimate source of human identity.

A homogenous group that is able to develop an awareness that goes beyond its more obvious homogeneity is able to extend its own boundaries and include other people without losing its identity. A strong and stable society is not one that seeks to define itself by identifying the ways in which it is different from others, or by insisting on uniformity, but one that is willing and able to accommodate diversity within a common framework of the larger realities of life. The worth of the individual is one such reality. Awareness of

self-worth leads naturally to self-respect and respect for others is born from respect for the self.

Any community that is to survive and flourish must respond to the needs of its members as human beings and seek to harmonize personal interests and those of the community as a whole. A community which fails to take account of human nature will eventually defeat its own purposes and, rather than integration, will suffer disintegration.

A community must also care for its natural environment and recognize its interdependency with other communities. Society is like a mosaic with the different patterns in its design being communities of varied culture, history, traditions, and philosophy. Each segment has its own beauty but much of the beauty is derived from its connection to and relationship with the larger whole of which it is a part.

Members of any society will vary in their understanding, attitude, and perception of life and ways of living but must develop and observe some norms, patterns and commonly-held values in their relationships and interactions with one another. Social integration requires the appreciation rather than the elimination of differences.

Integration must be on the basis of freewill and respect for others rather than being imposed in suppression of a sense of discrimination, injustice and difference. Indeed, some differences of opinion or policy are both inevitable and desirable in a democratic society which respects freedom of thought and so the fabric of which society is built must be at once strong, accommodating and flexible. Just as respect is required from those who have previously participated in others' exclusion or deprivation so also those who feel marginalized, disadvantaged or discriminated against must develop a lucid awareness of their self-respect and rights in order to remove any consciousness of unworthiness, or being a victim or outcast, and re-assert their dignity.

To live in society is to accept the moral obligation of at least being conscious that society comprises other human beings with rights and desires that must be acknowledged if not accommodated. The growth and development of moral values is not quantifiable in the same way as productivity or a national economy but these values are necessary for the maintenance of the social sub-structure. However insignificant it may seem, even the smallest of courtesies or expressions of civility can make life much easier and pleasanter for others, as well as contributing to the smooth functioning of society overall.

Social Integration through Communications

One of the major achievements of science and technology has been in the field of communication. Instantaneous communication of words and images from one end of the world to the other is a part of many people's daily lives. This constant and rapid flow is of more than dry information. An extensive network of cross-cultural exchanges has unveiled the richness, diversity and also poverty that exist in the world. Age-old barriers and divisions have been broken down. National lines are being erased so that even someone in a remote, seemingly far-flung corner of the planet is often in some way exposed to and has some idea of what is happening elsewhere in the world. The world can no longer be shut out; simply at the flick of a switch it can enter the family home through a television screen or radio speaker. Communication has freed many people from enforced isolation or ignorance. All have now become actors on the international stage and as scenes swiftly shift, and with an ever greater impact upon others, the need, and ability, to be informed has also heightened.

In some ways, however, enhanced technological horsepower is a mixed blessing as expectations or desires can be created for things unattainable or inappropriate and established natural and social systems threatened by new patterns of behaviour. Further, effective means and a greater amount of communication do not automatically result in a better quality of what is being communicated or in a sympathetic relationship between communicator and audience. As the barriers of distance dissolve they can starkly expose any remaining mental barriers, cultural misunderstandings or prejudices, intolerance or disrespect which, because they seem nearer may also become exaggerated. Under the justification of offering entertainment or novelty, people or cultures can be portrayed in a distorted or incomplete way.

On the other hand, in the great search for means of human upliftment, communication has made a distillation of the ideas of the people of the world, and a meeting of minds, a more realistic proposition than ever before. The challenge facing both governments and peoples alike is to determine how this wondrous technological capacity can really be exploited for the maximum benefit of all - to use newly available ideas, insights and perspectives to educate and build solid and lasting bridges of friendship, to show how to overcome differences rather than accentuating them and reviving or even giving birth to attitudes of discrimination and hatred.

On an individual level, all those involved in mass communication will need to develop and maintain a strong and finely attuned awareness of their own role and of the need for sensitivity in fulfilling their responsibility to the public to whom they offer a service. They have the opportunity to play a unique role in achieving greater social integration.

The Dignity of Work

The right to the dignity of work is one of the most basic expressions of human worth. Work allows the individual to provide for the basic needs of self and family, and then to achieve higher standards of living or use the fruit of their endeavours for the benefit of others. It is also an important part of the development and fulfilment of the individual through the expression and realization of skills, wisdom and potential. A society is enriched by the creative contribution and productive participation of people of both sexes having a variety of disciplines, skills and expertise. For the individual, personal satisfaction and self-esteem are enhanced by being part of a society of people which is the better for his or her efforts. Human dignity demands that work offer more than just the means of continued existence; it should also provide the opportunity to contribute to the common good of society.

However, work is not dignifying if it involves exploitation or discrimination, or if a person's individuality, endeavours and commitment are not given due recognition. Working conditions, including hours, must be humane and all work properly remunerated; working practices must be ethical and promote respectful relationships and social and environmental responsibility. Education and training can help prepare people for working life, and following retirement, retirees should be accepted as respected senior citizens who may still have a constructive part to play in society's affairs. The work itself should be varied and worthwhile and allow workers control over the use of their time and intellect. Ultimately, however, work will never be dignified until the dignity of the worker is recognized.

The eradication of poverty must inevitably involve the creation of new jobs. This requires investment which in turn depends on social stability. The three issues of poverty, unemployment and social fragmentation fundamentally arise from excluding people. The need of the hour is a spirit of inclusion - of reaching out to the marginalized and deprived and bringing them within the heart of a society characterised by caring and sharing. Governments can contribute to the building of such a society by taking steps to provide a social and business environment conducive to investment and the free and fair movement of capital, goods and the workforce. The possession of wealth brings with it responsibilities which an individual, or a private enterprise - also a community of persons - owes not just to shareholders, investors and employees but also to the society within which profits are accumulated. Deciding where and how to invest is not just a business issue but also involves moral considerations and judgement.

Individuals must also be prepared to help themselves by taking the initiative in actively looking for work and enhancing their ability to support themselves. Nations, communities, business and individuals all have a common interest in the welfare and progress of others; the human dimension is common to all of them and each in their own way must seek to improve the overall quality of life and conditions within the society of which they are a part. There will always be individual variations in which some people are happy with very little while others seek much more but human worth demands the dignity of the assurance of the possibility of work. Securing this middle ground for all is possible if society embodies the fundamental value of solidarity. Prosperity for some which violates the basic rights of others can never be more than a hollow and short-term achievement.

Uncaring and depersonalizing attitudes to workers, sometimes treated as little more than the means by which others may become rich, make work an undignified and inhuman experience for many. At the some time, many others carry out meaningful and constructive tasks that largely go unrecognized and unrewarded, despite their obvious contribution to the common good of society. What is required is a revival of the notion of service in which work may have a value and social relevance other than just economic. Work is then a service offered to another, the community, society or humanity as a whole, and allows people self-sufficiency, fulfilment and dignity by allowing them to express and be recognised for their innate capacity for creating and giving.

The right to work is the right to perform constructive, purposeful action for a fair reward. To deny this right to others is to deprive them of their dignity and also to deprive society of the benefit of their potential.

Freedom from Poverty, and Quality of Life

The individual's freedom to develop is in stark contrast to the freedom from want. In some parts of the world affluence is becoming more prevalent whereas for many a slide into deeper poverty is a fact of daily life. Globalization has led to greater wealth for many but greater poverty for others. Stubborn pockets of poverty persist, including in industrialized areas. There has been a polarization of extremes rather than an equalization, leading to a condition of so-called "social Darwinism" in which a prosperous few flourish at the expense of others. However, the world's interdependent nature dictates that security, prosperity and a healthy environment cannot be sustained for a few alone, and now the possibility of widespread migration from poor parts of a country to a richer part, or from one country to another, poses a threat to stability and security.

For any form of development to be effective a basic infrastructure is a primary requirement. This must include housing, health care, social services, work opportunities

and training programmes. Without this solid base as a foundation the superstructure of a better life will remain thinly spread and soon collapse. In their development programmes, countries must initiate comprehensive and appropriate infrastructure projects, as this will benefit the whole nation, while also ensuring that the individual's well-being is a priority. The burden and perils of rising materialism must also be reconciled with the need and desire for development and progress.

Development must be carried out by and for people, not machines or systems, and should empower people to lead a dignified life, secure in the protection of their basic rights. Economic growth is essential but is only a means to the end of a better quality of life for the individual. In seeking to provide for others it must not be forgotten that humans have rational, emotional and spiritual faculties, needs and aspirations as well as physical ones, all of which must be addressed. Life loses its meaning when it is focused on the physical to the exclusion of the larger realities of the spiritual. People must be enabled to make their own choices and participate in the creation of their future through the realization of their potential and in accordance with their own culture, beliefs and approaches. The fact that there may be alternatives does not mean that only one is right.

The human factor is at the heart of development. One aspect of this is the often considerable determination, will and motivation of people suffering from deprivation. Their skill, self-reliance, ingenuity and effort, upon which their daily struggle for survival depends, can make them competent agents for a change in their circumstances, or reliable partners in implementing development programmes. However self-help projects must respond to the actual needs, material and other, of the community if they are to be successful and should seek to involve community members in design as well as execution. Equitable distribution of the fruits of economic growth will then further empower people rather than increasing their marginalization.

The development of human resources - better described as the development of the human person - is paramount, as even one motivated individual can inspire many others to become involved. The poor must be seen as potential partners in development rather than the passive and helpless recipients of welfare or charity. Their poverty often owes more to social systems and structures than a limitation of abilities, and we must see how the deprived and marginalized can be enabled to contribute rather than forced to claim. More than just a poverty of material goods, many also suffer from a lack of knowledge and training which prevents them from escaping from undignified living conditions. Even when only very limited physical resources are available much can be achieved by a community able to capitalize on its security and goodwill. Continuing training and personal growth of workers can enhance productivity as well as motivation and contentment.

The root cause of poverty, or a deficiency of wealth, is a deficiency within the global human spirit. This poverty of values, the worst form of poverty, ultimately amounts to a lack of respect for the dignity of the human person, and a lack of self-respect can be both a symptom and a cause of poverty. Is humanity prepared and willing to declare that the extent of poverty which now exists is simply unacceptable - morally wrong - and take action to eradicate it? More than enlarging existing money supplies, what is required is choosing to achieve a more equitable distribution and deployment of existing wealth and resources. This involves a moral choice as much as the formulation of new economic or social policies or programmes.

Sustainable Development

Development which is not environmentally conscious can no longer be tolerated. Likewise, preservation of the environment is not possible without improving the quality of life of those whose fight for survival forces them to live in ways that harm the environment. While industrialized businesses continue polluting the environment, to the detriment of the lives and well-being of many, and ultimately to themselves, in often overpopulated rural areas poor people are forced to destroy forests, overuse soil and deplete water supplies simply to satisfy the basic needs of food, fuel and shelter. Poverty is as great a polluter as is inappropriate industrialization.

Environmental awareness has become a worldwide phenomenon but on the path of transition to a sustainably prosperous world society there do lie several high hurdles. People are becoming more conscious that the wounding of the environment constitutes a threat to humanity's survival as well giving rise to day-to-day inconvenience. However they are not always able, willing or sufficiently informed to accept the personal implications. Some need to be helped to understand how their behaviour impacts the environment, and accept that new attitudes and behaviour are not only ethically correct but also necessary, while others must be offered the possibility of a less destructive way of life.

For centuries, nature has served humanity. Now humanity must learn to respect and serve nature.

Prosperity for All

Environmental degradation is only one of the consequences of poverty and economic injustice. Many countries are potentially rich in natural resources but their people are poor because world markets are not adequately open. Protectionism can be a greater impediment to people's welfare than the lack of natural resources. What is required is a system of free and fair trade in which nations and traders are able to produce goods of their choice and export them freely for a fair price. Often to help pay crippling external debts, many countries are forced to use much of their land for cash crops that are of little, if any, benefit to the people of their country. Countries must become self-sufficient, produce their own food and be able to sell any surplus on local markets. This does not involve a return to primitive ways of commerce so much as the lifting of exploitative restraints and controls that often simply benefit economically dominant countries, although restrictive trading practices may also mean that consumers in developed countries encounter unnecessarily high prices.

Trading patterns must change before an economic disaster forces the whole world to open its eyes on a yawning chasm of long term global recession. If prosperity is everyone's right then poverty is everyone's responsibility. The global linking of economies means that a downturn in one country affects all others. Even if the main motive is greater profitability, corporations must further their inroads into the field of ethical ways of doing business. Developed and developing countries alike must be integrated into a mutually-cooperative trading system that offers self-sufficiency and economic dignity to everyone. The international community has a leading role to play in guiding economic forces towards greater prosperity for all. Governments, organizations and individuals must collaborate and combine in a free but fair interplay for the optimal development of the world community. Ultimately, however, economic success will be the fruit of productivity, efficiency and application, all of which depend on how human beings, individually and collectively, channel their creativity and inner resources.

Leadership, Good Governance and Public Service

Achieving peace and security in a world with many shared parameters and yet a wealth of differences requires leadership of the highest calibre. Such leaders would hold a vision of a world at peace and harmony, derived from their own inner qualities of peace, wisdom and harmony. Recognizable by what they are as much as for what they say, they would readily gain the confidence and trust of their electorate. Offering the best of themselves, their motives in seeking a position of authority would be to serve, which they would do with the interests of society as their foremost concern. Their self respect, tolerance and regard for others would be such that they can give and take criticism without offence. They would be agents for change that preserves and strengthens their community's central ideals. Sensitive to individual needs, imbued with compassion and broad vision, they would also maintain awareness of the larger picture not only as regards their own society but also the world. They would see themselves as instruments for the collective will of the community in bringing about whatever achievements are facilitated by their dedication and commitment. Their service of others would be on the basis of a feeling of self-fulfilment which would be revealed in generosity and humility.

World leaders should be like parents to their people, and the international community like a parent of the world, responsible and caring for the family of nations. If an aberrant child, a nation, defames the family honour then the responsible parent will take it upon itself, gently but firmly, to adopt positive measures to remedy the situation. In such circumstances the concerns of the world as a whole must be allowed to rise above national loyalties. A broader and higher reality must be recognized that will lead to the benefit of all rather than upholding one nation's rights, or securing one nation's economic advantage, to the exclusion or at the expense of others.

International affairs must be conducted ethically, in a stable forum and in accordance with clearly defined and universally agreed upon principles. Discussions must take place, decisions be made and rules applied in a climate of impartiality, understanding, tolerance and the willingness to give whatever is demanded of others. Precaution, prevention and forward planning must be relied upon to help avoid conflict but those who claim to set or enforce standards must also live by them. Differences among individuals, cultures and groups must be acknowledged and appreciated and any disagreements resolved peacefully through listening, non-violence and dialogue.

Likewise, the raison d'être of legislative and administrative bodies within the smaller society and community is to serve the public. Increasingly, good governance requires that they facilitate or enable rather than impose, giving their services with integrity to ensure that individuals know and have the possibility of enjoying their rights. This is the primary moral and political duty of leaders and civil servants in any society.

So also in any community, injunctions of good behaviour are meaningless unless they are demonstrated in practical life by those proposing and supporting them. The responsible behaviour of those most visible in society will be an example to people of how their rights can be upheld and of what responsibilities they are to fulfill. A law giving people certain rights and specifying certain responsibilities is meaningless unless leaders of goodwill are prepared to model the behaviour necessary for people to experience fulfilment of those rights. People will then respect the law because it is right, not because it is backed by might.

A Task for All

Bold plans for a better future have often been proclaimed by great statesmen and inspiring visionaries. However it is not they alone who can realize such a vision. The visions, enthusiasm, commitment and hard work of ordinary people count just as much, if not more, for without their participation and groundwork not even the best of plans will ever become more than a castle in the sky. Further, helping to accomplish the task will be a source of pride and joy to people as they recognize their contribution, no matter how small, to be an indispensable part of the whole.

Governments are representatives of their people and must also be accountable to them. Political processes must be inclusive, participatory and transparent. Representations or commitments made must be observed and implemented with integrity. People must have the opportunity to voice their opinions when government policies are being formulated. The task of the democratic process is frustrated if people do not express themselves to the government supposedly representative of them. Thus the people have the responsibility to keep themselves informed, express their desires, goals and concerns clearly to governments and to exercise common sense in choosing their leaders. Although governments can set norms and guidelines it is the responsibility of each individual to participate in society in this way. Governments in turn have the responsibility of listening to and implementing the aspirations and defending the concerns of their electorate, those who have delegated power to them. There must be a dialogue, the open disclosure of interests by each party and a discussion of options so that each is aware of the perception and opinions of the other and both can then work cooperatively towards shared goals. The global nature of the world means that global governance is required and, to achieve this when there is so much diversity, common threads must be identified that link the whole while allowing individuality to flourish and as a source of enrichment rather than division. Likewise, functional mechanisms must be put in place to provide a forum for discussion, problem-solving and the initiation of action.

It is not enough for one person simply to say that they have a right which someone should fulfill. Awareness of a right is only the beginning of a process of give and take as with every right comes a responsibility. People must accept their responsibility to give before expecting fulfilment of their right to receive.

A Society Worthy of its Members

The political dignity of the individual demands that not every aspect of social life be regulated and controlled by the government. Community and citizens' groups often provide a more convenient means for people to organize their affairs on a local basis, to promote awareness or add depth, quality and a human touch to services provided or tasks undertaken by the government. In this way they can complement and supplement, rather than substitute, the task of government. Every person has the right to lead their own life and pursue happiness. Governments cannot ensure happiness but they should provide the means to make it possible for individuals to pursue happiness on an individual, social or wider basis.

Society exists for the benefit of its members and must seek to give each individual the possibility of attaining a decent way of life including such basic necessities as food, education, health care, housing and employment. However society is not an anonymous force or a privileged few blindly regulating and controlling all aspects of social life. A society that recognizes the value of the human person will develop administrative mechanisms that are worthy of its members' trust and so encourage the expression of their

wishes. This requires a strong spirit of communication which calls for an ethic of providing adequate, appropriate and accurate information. People must be kept adequately informed about the state of affairs in society and the world. Often such awareness can touch the heart and conscience of individuals and inspire them to take action to resolve an unacceptable situation or the sub-standard living conditions of others. Ultimately, a stable, responsible and secure society is made out of stable, responsible and secure individuals.

Security and Freedom

Security and peace are achieved through development, not the use of weaponry, and increasingly they relate to ensuring better conditions of life rather than simply the preservation or continuance of life. Social development is a prerequisite for a secure, stable and prosperous society and people's welfare must be a priority rather than a by-product of statistical economic growth. Today it is social disintegration and economic exclusion that represent the most dangerous threats to security and peace.

In today's globalized world, putting people first and placing greater emphasis on the worth of the human person means that the security of people must be given more importance than the security of national boundaries. Increasingly, human security is breached within such boundaries rather than across them, requiring reconsideration of the principle of self-determination. Leaders must recognize the physical, intellectual and spiritual inviolability of the individual as a child of God and place this before increasingly insignificant man-made boundaries.

At the heart of a secure society lies individual awareness of the worth, dignity and inviolability of the self. Recognizing the original nature of the human person to be sacred, the welfare of the individual must be at the centre of legislative, institutional and administrative policies, structures and systems and governments must ensure respect for all human rights. A social infrastructure of justice, responsibility and freedom, in which the rule of law is observed by and impartially applied to all, must be built. However, the ultimate guardian of the security of the individual and of humanity is not the letter of the law but the human spirit and conscience - the quiet voice that guides us and which, although it can be stifled, can never die.

Recognition of the inherent worth of the individual is the foundation of freedom and the ethical basis for democracy. The democratic process seeks to allow individuals to fulfill their potential; it upholds their rights, respects their opinion and lets them collectively create their future.

In this interdependent world the ideal of freedom does not exist in isolation but in the context of the freedom and rights of others. It carries with it the responsibility of recognizing and respecting the freedom of others. Therefore freedom of choice must not be exercised at the expense of another's ability to realize their freedom. Freedom is not freedom if it violates, or does not acknowledge, the freedom of others. It must be balanced by conscience and duty, including the duty to preserve one's own self-respect and integrity. Freedom is the ability to realize one's fullest potential as a human being and allow others to realize theirs. The ultimate freedom is the truth of freedom from inner struggle as this gives the human spirit beauty and power.

Universal Values and the Divine

The true nature of the self has been the object of much contemplation and discussion but at the essence of the notion of the dignity and worth of the individual is the sacredness or divine nature of human life. In so far as the lives of some people seem to be far removed from anything sacred or divine it is useful to distinguish innate or inherent qualities from ones that are acquired. The fact that, by reason of whatever influences, pressures or circumstances, an individual now acts in ways that are injurious to society or the self is not inconsistent with the ultimate inherent goodness of the human soul. Having gone astray, humanity must now find its way back to its divine roots through a process of education and the conscious exercise of choice. Such education must focus on moral and spiritual values.

Values are those concepts that we adopt as the motivation for our behaviour. They determine what we are in favour of and attracted by and what we oppose and find unappealling and distasteful. They govern our decisions and what we believe to be good or right and what we believe to be bad or wrong. As well as prompting our behaviour they are also the basis of our judgement and evaluation of actions. The value motivating an action will often determine the extent to which the action is right, wrong or merely neutral Values are the foundation of commitment and determine our view of the world. They give direction, purpose and meaning to life. The destiny of both individuals and society is shaped and created with the values by which they live and the crisis now facing humanity is the result of too little emphasis being placed on some fundamental human, moral and spiritual values.

In choosing values, or becoming aware of values we have inherited or acquired, we are assigning worth or importance to an aspect of life. There may be instances where a value choice is a matter of personal opinion but a number of values are fundamental to the well-being of humanity as a whole. Such values can transcend the particularities of humanity's richly diverse cultural, philosophical and social heritage and form the bedrock on which to build international cooperation. Cooperation may require some sacrifice of the self by all concerned but the altar of attaining such shared values is one worthy of such sacrifice. Such values are universal not just in their application to all of humanity but also in their application to all fields of human activity.

Wherever there are human beings there must also be human values. For example, respect, honesty and benevolence are as appropriate, and necessary, in business dealings, politics and international relationships as they are in family relationships. These values are not our lowest common denominator so much as our highest common denominator and it is around them, rather than shared doubts, fears or weaknesses, that humanity must rally itself.

Choosing Values

As our values are expressed in our actions and lives, individually and collectively, it is important that the values we choose are the right ones - ones that are conducive to the good of the self and the common good. They must also be based upon a clear understanding of and respect for the self and aligned with the inner truth revealed by our conscience and consciousness. An important part of the shift now required in our attitudes is to place more trust in and emphasis on the reality of personal experience and insight. It is this which can give us the strength and courage to listen to and heed the quiet inner voice of the conscience and do what intuition, guided by understanding, indicates to be right. Our belief in values must be complemented by an experience of them within ourselves.

To reflect deeply upon the value choices open to us, to define and compare values and adopt them, is to empower ourselves and give direction to life. Such freely chosen values are almost invariably at one with the qualities of which the worth of the individual, our inherent goodness, is comprised. To remain true to oneself and such values is to attain self-respect. Personal fulfilment also has its root in the expression, sharing and experience of such values. The deeper such roots are laid the more we can replace acquired tendencies within ourselves which we find harmful, wrong or self-destructive. These values, consciously chosen, then become virtues, a natural state of being.

Implementing Higher Values -- Education and Application

Lofty ideals and noble principles have been identified and eloquently articulated by the international community over past years and constitute the targets and goals of many development programmes. However shared values are more than just the end for which we are striving. They must also constitute the means, or the basis for policies and the measures taken to implement them. If such values are integrated into development plans this will strengthen commitment to their implementation and enable people to identify with them and believe in them.

The real question is how such values can be integrated and implemented. The commitment to them has been expressed before and there are few instances of an individual or government deliberately trying to create a crisis for themselves. On an individual level, the desire to live by defined values can be affected by the desire to conform with others, impulsiveness, carelessness and the weight of other, conflicting tendencies. Herein lies the importance of the personal experience of such values through deliberate contemplation, spiritual practice and careful interaction. A strong measure of discipline and self-control is also required. Fortunately, this, like other values, is something that can be learned, acquired and strengthened. Simply to say one's personality does not include self-control and therefore to abandon a desire to live by better values is to shirk the real task and avoid the responsibility of seeking personal growth and completeness. Further, society is a community of individuals and so its condition depends on that of the individuals of which it is comprised. A commitment to the betterment of the self is also a commitment - and possibly the most meaningful commitment that can be made - to the betterment of society as a whole. Likewise, actions that benefit others will also bring benefit to the self.

The foundation of living a life based on higher values is understanding - an understanding of the self, the inherent goodness and worth of the self and of the moral rectitude and practical merit of such a life. Ultimately, it is in the best interests of an individual or society to live by higher values. Virtue is more than just its own reward; in any sphere of activity it is also the foundation of success whereas actions based on wrong values carry within themselves the seeds of their own nemesis. A change in the understanding of such concepts requires education and silent reflection but can lead to a change of attitude and values and then behaviour and lifestyle. For example, given the intention to stop smoking, it is not enough either simply to deprive oneself of access to tobacco or to reiterate the intention to stop.

Behavioural change requires an understanding of why something is wrong or bad, the commitment to change and also the self-control, discipline and will power to live by that commitment. Merely accepting the need for or desirability of a value is not enough. It is a necessary first step but only the beginning of the journey of change.

The humility to accept that old modes of thinking and behaviour are no longer appropriate to the time (if they ever were) and to accept responsibility for past mistakes without blaming others will help the process. Patience will also be required as no matter how fervent the desire for change may be it will often take time to remould or replace deeply ingrained patterns of thinking and behaviour. Courage and determination will help overcome weakness, prevarication or opposition and are a prerequisite to deep transformation.

The aim of enabling deeper understanding, and the experience, transmission and enrichment of values, can only be achieved through education. There is an increasing perception that a better world requires a way of life in which values such as truth, integrity, respect, responsibility and love are expressed in action rather than just as words or abstract concepts. An education that has human, moral and spiritual understanding and values at its heart, and the inculcation of them as its aim, is central to the realization of this vision. Values must become an integral part of the fabric of the human being before they are part of the fabric of society. It is the responsibility of each individual to dedicate time and attention to achieve this.

For its part, and within the bounds of its capacity, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University would gladly participate in the elaboration of experiential educational programmes and spiritual retreats that can further the process of helping individuals realize the full potential of their inherent goodness. Such re-education is now crucial. Our actions can no longer be guided by vague notions about the future and fears rooted in the past. They must be focused through the prism of spiritual understanding and a clear vision of the future we seek. Humanity has not lost the ability to hope and dream and having this ability is the first precondition to the dream being realized. However, we must now add insight, faith, will power and determination to our vision and identify ourselves more closely with it to make it truly belong to us. The better world must be born and take firm roots in our hearts before it can lay down roots in the world.

Only then will the worst of times become the best of times.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.
The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.
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