

“Compassionate Leadership for an Interdependent World”

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We have come together for this conference to think deeply about the kind of creative and courageous leadership that is needed at the local and global level to address the urgent challenges that face our world, including climate change, violent conflict, and a destabilizing global economic recession. We are in the midst of a crisis of global governance that can only be met with a partnership of government, business, and civil society and imaginative new approaches to our environmental, economic, and social problems.

As we begin I want to share with you how glad I am that we have a new president in the United States and that it is Barack Obama. His election marks the emergence of a new generation of political leadership and a milestone in the evolution of race relations in the U.S., and it will lead to a major shift in U.S. policy, including a new multilateral approach in international affairs and a serious engagement with the challenge of sustainable development. Millions of US citizens like myself have renewed hope for the future of our nation and the world. President Obama has an opportunity to be a model of the new compassionate leadership that this conference has been designed to explore.

Compassion is a spiritual and ethical ideal, and the call for compassionate leadership focuses our attention on a critical issue. We are living at a time in human history when science and technology are the most powerful forces shaping human

development. However, science and technology by themselves cannot resolve the underlying problems we face, and as is all too evident, they can be used to destroy as well as to create.

The deepest challenges that we confront personally and as a society are ethical and spiritual in nature. They concern the values to which we are committed. What kind of person do I choose to be? To whom and for what am I responsible? What do I consider to be right and wrong, good and bad, in my conduct and relationships? What quality of community life do I choose to protect, promote, and secure for future generations? How each one of us, our organizations, and the human family collectively respond to these questions may well turn out to be the decisive factor in determining the future of humanity.

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to address the topic of compassionate leadership with special reference to one of the conference themes--interconnectedness. More specifically, what is compassion? Where does it come from? How is it related to the idea of interconnectedness? Are there spiritual perspectives on these matters that may be illuminating? How can leaders in organizations integrate the spirit of compassion into what they are doing? The Earth Charter, which is one source of the inspiration for this conference, can be a valuable resource for individuals and organizations interested in compassionate leadership. Some thoughts about the Earth Charter in this regard are included in the reflections that follow.

1. The Nature of Compassion

The word compassion is used in Western culture today far more frequently than it was a generation ago. This change reflects the influence over the past three decades of Buddhism and other Asian traditions that regard compassion as a supreme spiritual and ethical ideal. In the Christian and Jewish traditions the emphasis is put on love – loving God and loving one’s neighbor. The concept of love in Western religious and philosophical traditions has many different meanings and is much broader in scope than the concept of compassion. However, compassion is fundamental to the Jewish and Christian idea of love for one’s neighbor.

The English word compassion comes from a Latin term that literally means to suffer together with another. In relations with people, the emergence of compassion is closely associated with a keen awareness that we all share with one another what is most fundamental in human experience--the capacity to feel pain and joy and the desire to escape suffering and find happiness. Growing out of identification with others and their suffering, compassion involves feelings of deep sympathy. Importantly, compassion also means being actively responsible in our relationships with others and being committed to reducing their suffering and promoting their well-being insofar as we are able.

In the simplest terms, compassion means helping others, and if one cannot be of help, then not harming them. If a person is to provide effective compassionate leadership, he or she must, of course, have the knowledge and understanding necessary to be really helpful. The American philosopher, John Dewey, defined sympathy as sensitive responsiveness to the interests, rights, and suffering of others, and he commented that what is needed in our leaders is wide and deep sympathy combined with intelligence and

knowledge.¹ Intelligent sympathy is what guides compassionate leaders in their ethical deliberations and decision-making.

Over the past three thousand years, there have been many spiritual leaders and philosophers who have taught that genuine compassion knows no boundaries of race, class, nationality, religion, or species. It embraces all living beings. There is good reason to believe that the future survival and flourishing of human civilization may depend on the ability of humanity to come to this realization. With this in mind, the Earth Charter identifies the inspiration for compassionate leadership with respect and care for the whole community of life in all its diversity. Accordingly, it includes sections on ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, non-violence, and peace.

2. Interconnectedness, Having, and Being

One of the sacred rituals of the North American Plains Indians concludes with all of the participants saying together: “We are all related.”² It is a deep understanding of this truth that generates compassion. Coming to the realization that I and other living beings are not really two, that we are interconnected both physically and spiritually, is what leads us to identify with others and to want to help them overcome problems, grow, build good relationships, and live rewarding lives.

At this juncture it is important to acknowledge that we live in societies where the view that we are all related is not widely shared. Lip service may be given to the ideal of compassion, but the practice of compassion is the exception, not the rule. Much in the dominant culture in the industrialized nations encourages a very different outlook and

orientation in our relations with other persons and the larger world of nature. Using the terminology from Erich Fromm's excellent book, *To Have or to Be?*, we can call this orientation "the having mode of existence."³ The origin of the ideas, attitudes, and values that make up the having orientation is a biological fact. People cannot live and develop without having things and exercising some measure of control over the world around them.

However, the person who relates to life in the having mode turns everything, including other persons, into an object to be possessed, controlled and used. Underlying the having orientation is an assumption that I exist as a separate self and my happiness depends on building up and protecting this separate self by having and controlling as much of the world as possible. For a person in the grip of this outlook, life becomes a self-centered, competitive search for wealth, power and fame. The destructive social and ecological impact of the having mode of existence is becoming more evident every day. In addition, if a person approaches life in this way, the inescapable reality of death threatens to render life in the final analysis utterly meaningless and absurd, for in the end we cannot have anything.

There is another way to approach life, which is suggested in the Preamble of the Earth Charter, which states: "When basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more." What leads a person to put the primary emphasis in his or her life on being rather than having is the realization that we exist as interdependent members of the communities to which we belong. We are not whole and complete alone. We need others. We find fulfillment in relationship.

In the being orientation, I identify myself with my relationships and the communities of which I am a part and with what I care about, love, create, share, give to others, and sacrifice for. Being is about human solidarity and kinship with other life. The challenge of life from this perspective is to develop our distinctive intellectual, artistic, moral and spiritual capacities in and through serving the needs of others and contributing to the life of the community. Compassion develops in a person as he or she grows in the being mode.

Even though there is a natural tendency in all of us to give priority in our lives to being and not having, this tendency is easily repressed in an industrialized economy and highly competitive consumer society. Furthermore, why should I identify with people who are not members of my family or close friends? Why should I identify with people who are different from me culturally and extend compassion to the greater community of life? Are we really interconnected with all people and all life, and if so how can we know and experience this truth? There are a variety of ways a person can seek answers to these questions.

3. Thinking with your Head and your Heart

First of all, the study of science and philosophy, can provide us with an intellectual understanding of interconnectedness. Social psychology and the other social sciences persuasively demonstrate that people are intensely social beings. *We are* interdependent members of communities. Evolutionary biology discloses the interrelation of humanity with the three billion year development of life on Earth. The science of ecology demonstrates the interdependence of all individual beings with their environment

and the interdependence of humanity as a whole and nature. Human beings are members of local ecosystems and of the greater community of life on Earth.

Anyone who doubts that our interdependence has become global in scope need only consider the newspaper and TV reports on climate change or the current economic crisis. Today no nation or group of people can solve the major environmental, economic and social problems they face by acting alone. In our increasingly interdependent world, cooperation has become essential.

Astronomers, physicists, and cosmologists have revealed our interdependence with the larger universe. As Carl Sagan put it, we are all quite literally made of star stuff. Some of the atoms in our bodies are billions of years old and were formed by the supernova that created our solar system. Thich Nhat Hanh, the widely read Vietnamese Zen teacher, likes to invite people to reflect on the origin of a piece of fruit before eating it. If we do, he says, we will realize that eating a piece of fruit involves taking into ourselves the energy of the sun, the life of the fruit tree, the nourishment of the rain that helped the tree to grow, the labor of many people, and so forth. “You can see everything in the universe in one tangerine,” observes Thich Nhat Hanh.⁴ In addition, with a little imaginative reflection we can understand that every single one of our accomplishments in life are supported by thousands of interconnections with the world around us and the larger universe.

Drawing on the insights of contemporary science, many philosophers explain that the universe is governed by the principles of differentiation and interconnectedness. Each being is at once a unique individual and interrelated with the totality. “Nothing is

itself without everything else,” writes Thomas Berry.⁵ In short, each one of us is a unique manifestation of the totality which is the universe. We are in the universe and part of it and the universe is in us.

All of this scientific and philosophical information provides us with a rational account of our interdependence and an explanation as to why it is wise as a practical matter to be morally responsible, respectful of the rights of others, and good citizens locally and globally. However, reason and science by themselves often do not have significant influence when it comes to changing the attitudes, values, and behavior of the vast majority of people. They tend to view science based arguments as rather abstract and theoretical. A good example of this problem is the limited success that the environmental movement has had using science and reason over the past four decades in its efforts to educate the public and promote a major socio-economic transformation in industrial societies. To awaken genuine compassion leading to real change in how people think and act, something more is needed than information and reasoned arguments. It is necessary to engage the heart. In the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament and in much Asian religious thought, the heart refers to the deeper center of understanding, feeling and will in human nature.

In his autobiography, Memories, Dreams and Reflections, Carl Jung tells the story of encountering in the southwestern United States a Pueblo Indian, who explained to Jung that he thought most Europeans and their descendants in America were mad. Jung asked why he thought that. Because they think with their heads he said in reply. Surprised by this response, Jung asked with what did he think. The man pointed to his heart. Jung

came to believe that this Pueblo Indian had shared with him a profound insight that exposed a deep problem in our modern secular and scientific culture.⁶

In short, to get in touch with our basic humanity and to awaken compassion we must learn to think with our hearts as well as our heads. The Dalai Lama, who is believed by his followers to be an incarnation of the great Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara, often comments that the purpose of spiritual practice is to develop a good heart. By a good heart he means a compassionate heart unclouded by delusion, hatred and greed and open to others and concerned to address the needs of the world.⁷

When trying to understand what is meant by thinking with your heart, it is important to distinguish two very different ways of knowing. One type of knowing is the product of the mind's capacity for reasoning, analysis, quantification, and calculation. It requires detachment and the separation of subject from object. It seeks to operate free from emotion and subjectivity. It is a head centered way of knowing. People with a having orientation rely almost exclusively on this way of knowing. The great achievement of this approach to knowledge is modern science and the technology it makes possible. Science is essential for human development in the contemporary world, but it is not sufficient for the achievement of human well-being.

There is another way of knowing that involves a direct encounter of the whole feeling, thinking person with the thing, person or situation known. In this form of knowing the separation between subject and object is overcome. The knowing subject participates in the object known. Feeling and emotion are involved. The truth known is felt as well as apprehended intellectually. The knowledge acquired is sometimes called

experiential insight. Experiential insight involves an intimate, felt, encounter with the living truth.

Engaging with life with one's whole being on this level is what is meant by thinking with your heart. It is the heart and experiential insight that reveals to us our interconnectedness with the world in a way that has the power to generate authentic compassion and transform our behavior. Thinking with your heart as well as your head is fundamental to "being more."

In a TV interview, the playwright Arthur Miller provided an instructive example of what it means to think with your heart. After a performance of his play, "Incident at Vichy," Miller was questioned in as to how he endeavors to communicate moral concerns and insights in one of his plays. Does he, for example, put into the mouths of his characters a clear rational explanation of the moral conflicts presented in the drama. Miller emphatically stated that he would never do this. If the moral problem is intellectualized in this way, he explained, people can deal with it in an abstract, head centered fashion and avoid a direct personal encounter with the concrete, living truth. Only an encounter that involves emotional engagement can awaken real moral insight and inspire moral action. As a playwright, he tries to present on the stage a drama that takes hold of people and touches them deeply. As he put it, you "must see with your guts."⁸ Seeing the truth with your guts involves the kind of interrelatedness and experiential insight that awakens compassion. This is thinking with your heart.

Arthur Miller's comments give another meaning to the title of this conference – "No guts, No glory." This story also points to the power of the arts when it comes to

waking us all up, generating compassion, and stirring us to act in response to suffering and injustice.

4. The Journey Inwards

However, science, philosophy and the arts by themselves are not enough to liberate most of us from the lure of the having mode of existence and to put us in touch with the deeper center of our being, which is the wellspring of genuine compassion. What is also needed is a journey inwards in search of our true selves. Who am I? What is my true identity? To what communities do I belong? For most of us, the practice of compassion requires that we heed the imperative of Socrates and Plato: “Care for your soul.”

The journey inwards can proceed in many different ways with the aid of a variety of methodologies. Deep metaphysical reflection, contemplative dialogue, contemplative prayer, and meditation as well as psychotherapy all can be beneficial. Each person has to find his or her own way. The goal is to heal the psyche where it has been injured and to confront the delusion, self-centeredness, anger, hatred and greed that cloud the mind, silence the heart, and perpetuate division and conflict.

Spiritual growth involves a process of freeing the mind and heart of ignorance and fear and expanding our sense of identity to include ever wider communities of life. Anyone who has the courage and perseverance to seek deep self-knowledge will find that their identity is not adequately defined by any form of tribalism, nationalism, fundamentalism or religious exclusivism or by anthropocentrism. This is not to deny the

great value of cultural diversity and the importance of family, tribe, religion and nationality as components of who we are.

However, when I look deeply into myself, I discover that beyond my cultural identity I am a human being who seeks wholeness and happiness and in this regard share a common nature and identity with all people. What unites us as human beings is more fundamental than what divides us. It is this insight that is affirmed in the Golden Rule, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

With Albert Schweitzer, we can also discover at the core of our being a numinous spark of life that awakens a sense of the sacred. This realization can lead to the further awareness that "life, as such, is sacred" and to development of the attitude of reverence for life. Schweitzer links compassion closely with reverence for life, and he argues that the spirit of reverence for life leads beyond an anthropocentric to a biocentric world view, extending compassion to the whole community of life and all living beings. With this in mind, he defines the first principle of the ethical life as follows: what is good is "to preserve life, to promote life, to raise to its highest value life that is capable of development," and what is evil is "to destroy life, to injure life, to repress life which is capable of development."⁹ For many people, commitment to the ethics of reverence for life is deepened by their relationships with animals and other life forms and the experience of the wonder and beauty of the natural world.

For a number of years I underwent formal training in Zen Buddhist meditation, and this has led me to appreciate the very different language Buddhism uses to describe where the journey inwards leads. For example, Zen Buddhists say that perseverance in

the spiritual quest will bring a person to realize that his or her true self is no-self. They use the philosophical term emptiness (sunyata) in this regard. They affirm that the deeper truth of ourselves and all things is emptiness. What they mean is that all beings, including persons, are without – empty of -- a separate self that can exist independently apart from everything else. The Buddha taught that the idea that we have a fixed, separate self and independent existence is a delusion and the underlying cause of human suffering. The deeper truth about ourselves is interdependence.¹⁰ Each of us is a unique, individual being, but our being is constituted by our relations with the world. This is a truth that we can directly experience for ourselves in and through the practice of meditation and by living and acting with compassion. Insight into the truth of emptiness inspires compassion, and acting with compassion deepens insight into emptiness. In the Zen tradition, the purpose of spiritual training is not to save oneself as a separate individual; it is to clarify the mind and awaken the heart so that one can enter into right relationship with others, help them, and better serve the community of life with which one is intimately interconnected.

5. Implementing the Spirit of Compassion

What can a non-governmental organization, business organization or government agency do to instill the spirit of interdependence and compassion in its staff and to implement this spirit in its operations? There follow several suggestions.

First, Thomas Merton, the American Cistercian monk, theologian and social critic, initiated a practice known as contemplative dialogue. Today the Merton Institute and the Center for Contemplative Dialogue in the United States use this practice to assist

organizations improve the quality of working relations among employees and staff and better the relations between organizations and the communities they effect.

Contemplative dialogue encourages people to slow down, get in touch with their basic humanity, cultivate greater self-awareness and situational awareness, clarify their assumptions, avoid defensive behavior, learn to listen, and develop a greater understanding of the shared purpose of the group or organization involved. Using contemplative dialogue is one way to support the intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth of the members of an organization and to build stronger, more effective organizations.¹¹

Second, make ethical reflection a fundamental aspect of strategic planning and every day problem solving. Many leaders are uncomfortable with ethics. They associate ethical thinking with either an inflexible moral absolutism on the one hand or an extreme moral relativism that views judgments about ethical values as a purely private and subjective matter on the other hand. However, there is a rational middle way between moral absolutism and extreme moral relativism. Sound ethical judgments require thinking with the head and the heart, that is, the integration of a compassionate orientation in relation to the world with reason and experimental inquiry. In this approach, judgments about right conduct will be relative to the situation at hand, but different courses of action can be evaluated rationally and compassionately in the light of their consequences.

The Earth Charter can be used as an instructive ethical guide when conducting an assessment of and further developing the policies and strategies of an organization. It has been drafted as an inclusive ethical framework for building a just, sustainable and

peaceful global society. It seeks to inspire compassionate leadership. It endeavors to clarify the responsibilities we all have in our relations with other people, the greater community of life, and future generations. The principles in the Earth Charter are very general guidelines. Like all general ethical principles they do not tell you exactly what to do in concrete situations, but they do tell you what to think about when you are trying to decide what to do. The Earth Charter can also be used with staff to raise awareness, to further education for sustainable development, and to inspire action.

Third, it is very important to keep in mind that in organizing and carrying out any project the process is just as important as the final product. Means and ends are closely interrelated. The ends we achieve are shaped by the means we use. For example, if you win a battle over policy and strategy in your organization but in the process leave your colleagues bitter and angry over heavy handed tactics, your short-term victory may leave you with a weaker organization and long-term problems.

Regarding the drafting of the Earth Charter, we knew that the consultation process was as important as the declaration we produced. By devoting five years to the project, we were able to involve hundreds of organization and thousands of individuals from all regions of the world. This insured that when the document was completed people all over the world had a real sense of ownership of the document, and it gave the Earth Charter a legitimacy as an ethical framework that it would not have had otherwise. Earth Charter drafting meetings were attended by people from many different nations and cultures and by representatives of many diverse interest groups. In order to ensure that everyone felt that meetings were being conducted in an evenhanded manner and that no one group was

imposing their particular agenda on everyone else, we often rotated the chairing of the meetings and followed carefully crafted procedural guidelines.

In conclusion, I have suggested various ways of thinking about what compassion means—intelligent sympathy, helping and not harming, reverence for life, and respect and care for the whole community of life. Compassion grows with a heartfelt understanding of our interconnectedness and interdependence. Compassionate leaders are people who have the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity to act with their whole being and to think with their hearts as well as their heads. In their decision-making and choices, they subordinate having to being and are mindful of the long-term as well as short-term consequences of their decisions and actions. Compassionate leadership is what is needed today to heal social divisions, to protect the environment, to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to climate change, and to promote the socio-economic transformations at all levels that will lead to creation of a sustainable future. It is compassion and love that take us out of ourselves and into relation with the world and with the great sacred mystery of being. For those who persevere on this path, awareness of the suffering in the world will bring much sadness, but there will also be great joy and a deepening trust in the meaning and value of life.

Notes

1. Steven C. Rockefeller, John Dewey: Religion Faith and Democratic Humanism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 242-243, 299-300). Dewey argues that sympathy is essential to the process of sound moral thinking and the pursuit of justice, because it “carries thought out beyond the self...rendering vivid the interests of others and urging us to give them the same weight as those which touch our own honor, purse, and power.” See John Dewey, Ethics in John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 7, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) pp. 251, 270.

2. Joseph Epes Brown, The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), p.17.
3. Erich Fromm, To Have or To Be? (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976), p.24.
4. Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), pp. 21-22.
5. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), p. 77.
6. Carl G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 247-248.
7. The Dalai Lama: A Policy of Kindness; An Anthology of Writings By and About the Dalai Lama, Sidney Piburn, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y., USA: Snow Lion Publications, 1990), pp. 58, 88-89, 112, 119.
8. Vermont ETV (United States), April 7 1976.
9. Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography, C. T. Campion, trans. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933, 1949), pp. 158-159.
10. For a clear statement regarding this point, see The Dalai Lama, "A Tibetan Buddhist Perspective", in Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, ed., Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) p. 114.
11. The Merton Institute's method of contemplative dialogue appears to be in accord with the programs of ZIN.