

## Global Crossroads: Which Way to the 21st Century?

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It is a great honour for me to speak at the opening session of this distinguished Assembly of educators and others who are concerned with how we might best equip the human community for its entry into the 21st century. Yours is naturally an American focus, but I think the fact that you have given this Assembly the overall theme of "Global Crossroads" indicates your recognition that it is only as one human community that we have any real hope of beginning the next century in dignity, harmony and civility.

I am not myself an educator in the formal sense. But I come from an institution that has been entrusted by the United Nations General Assembly with trying to improve understanding of pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare. Speaking from that perspective, it seems clear to me that all countries - developed or underdeveloped, East or West of ideological divide - are ill-prepared to deal with the swiftly changing, enormously complex, and increasingly competitive world of tomorrow. Finding the means to prepare the whole of the global society for such a world is therefore essential.

I see the world ahead as one where we will be hearing, with increasing insistence from non-Western cultures, of the need and the right to maintain their own cultural identity. It would be wrong to assume that we are moving toward a single world culture - a pluralistic global society is an inevitable reality to which we must learn to adjust.

At the same time, there is the undeniable fact of growing interdependence, however asymmetrical that interdependence presently is. It is becoming obvious that universalistic concepts of a cosmopolitan world order derived from a single dominant cultural perspective do not have much meaning for our understanding of the dynamics of interdependence and its present structural disparities. When one considers the capacity we now possess for mutual destruction and the easy availability of the means of violence, we realize the premium that must be put on somehow making this interdependence work. It will only be out of the recognition of the pluralistic dynamics of change in the interaction of complex systems - a characteristic of our age - that we may be able to manage interdependence in a culturally diverse world.

Vast transformation processes are now under way at all levels of society, in all dimensions of human and social life, and in every corner of



this interdependent world. We need to develop the institutions that will make possible the management of interdependence within the context of this change - for as yet we have no such institutions in any adequate form. We do not have the socio-cultural models that could help to explain the dynamics of the interlocking processes of change through which our various civilizations are going.

We must further put a premium on developing our willingness and our capacity to understand each other. We need much deeper levels of mutual understanding between all cultures. This will call for more effective information flows where we ensure that information is exchanged between fellow members of the global community and does not just run down a one-way street.

We need also to recognize the relativity of one's own culture - that it is but one way of dealing with reality and the organization of society, in light of the vision one may have about the ultimate meaning of human existence, individually and collectively. There are many other cultures with visions no less valid. We need to see that such cultural pluralism enlarges the options open to all of us in making our choices about the future, both for our own societies and for the world at large.

As I look to the next century, now only 16 years down the road from our present global crossroads, I am more and more convinced that it will be the capacity to learn - and in particular to learn from each other - which, more than any other single factor, will determine the viability, autonomy and integrity of all societies. I am speaking here of a new kind of learning - one which will enable us to survive, in humane fashion, in a world undergoing profound transformation. We will have to adjust ourselves to living in a world of 10 billion people. A world in which science and technology are triggering rapid social changes and value changes.

Changes at the international level are now all interlinked with changes at the sub-national and national levels - politically, economically, culturally and psychologically. They all affect each other and with cumulative impact. Thus the challenge to learning is really the challenge of these rapidly changing sets of circumstances that touches every facet of society. It goes far beyond the field of education proper, demanding the expansion of the learning capacity of the nation as a whole - this holds for all nations, irrespective of their place on the economic ladder or ideological scale, but particularly so for powerful nations such as the United States.

I am, of course, aware, that the United States educational system has recently been the subject of intense self-appraisal and review in a number of major studies. I have not been able to read all of these studies, but, in those I have seen, I am struck with their lack of concern with the global community. There is little discussion of the role that education might play in helping contribute to the global debate on the structures needed for a more just and equitable world or of the struggles and sacrifices that could be called for in achieving such a world. These are concerns that occupy not just diplomats in the international arena - they are literally life-or-death questions for hundreds of millions of people around the globe.



One essential issue before this forum, therefore, is the question of America's capacity to live with others who are different - whose needs and aspirations arise from different cultural roots.

If one major requirement of our age is accepting the reality of a culturally pluralistic and interdependent world, another is the acknowledgement that the knowledge explosion has not really led to any enhancement of our ability to deal with today's pressing problems. It has not been accompanied by greater understanding and greater capacity for empathy and compassion. What the knowledge explosion has led to, in fact, is a great deal of confusion. Like most explosions it has fragmented things, sending off bits and pieces of knowledge in unrelated directions. Easier access to information, the expansion of communications, and the impossibility of controlling transborder data flows have all contributed to the general sense of loss of personal identity.

One of our great difficulties is accepting the enormous complexity and vulnerability of modern life on a globally interdependent scale. One sees the flight from this complexity into single-issue politics, simplistic ideological positions, and reactionary fundamentalism. When simplistic solutions fail, there is the too ready temptation to turn to force rather than to attempts at understanding and persuasion.

Efforts at reforming education systems, therefore, must take cognizance not only of the need to improve quality, however understandable that may be. At the same time, education has to respond to a new learning need - the need, in a state of interdependence such as the present one, to think and feel globally within the context of one's own society and culture.

Here the question of the infrastructure needed for listening and relating to others becomes extremely crucial. This needs to be built into the educational system, not just in the United States but in all countries. This calls for an approach that is not only cognitive, but also reaches to the roots of social behaviour and motivation. We are talking here about the deepest layers of self-awareness of nations and groups, and about the myths that provide continuity, purpose, and motivation for individual civilization, and in the perceived meanings and purposes of whole societies and nations.

This infrastructure will require early opportunities for learning of non-Western languages to be better able to understand and empathize with other cultures and relate them to America's interest. Here I fear the present efforts at reform have been inadequate. Very few Americans, for example, are now studying Chinese or Japanese, despite the enormous implications that these two cultures have for the future of the United States. Other languages of equal importance to the long-term interests of the United States are being similarly neglected. James Reston was on target, I believe, when he noted recently that while America was alright in the "hardware of high tech," in the "software of language" it was in some ways an underdeveloped country.

I know that many of you here are already pioneers in these difficult tasks and have accomplished much. But I think you will agree that still we are only touching the surface of the problem.



There is a need to develop teaching materials and modes of presentation that can sensitize students to the problems of global interdependence and to the fact that the United States, for all its power and economic weight, cannot live in isolation. Related to this, of course, would be the creation of innovative pedagogical methods.

The capacity of the educational system to do this will depend on the development of strong area and international studies at the university level. Ways should be found to enhance the excitement of teaching and learning about others in non-Western cultures - and thereby inspire more would-be teachers to work in these areas.

The humanities should be expanded to include more study of non-Western cultures - now an area that receives only passing attention in most cases. There is, in fact, a need for what I would term a "new humanities" emerging from three sources: first, taking into account one's own culture; second, from the myriad ways in which that culture interacts with non-Western cultures; and third, from the interface of science and technology with society. Excellence in science and technology is not enough - many of the choices that our societies will have to make will be essentially culture choices. It has become increasingly clear that in the final analysis the future is an ethical category. We very much need to develop the concepts and methodologies to deal effectively with the multidisciplinary and multidimensional requirements of emerging issues of national and global significance.

Another important learning component in today's pluralistic world is the interpersonal experience - learning about another culture by actually living in it. The United States has already had considerable experience here through efforts like those of the American Field Service, the Peace Corps, Youth for Understanding, and the Fulbright Scholarship programme. These are just some examples. There are many others, I know. Such person-to-person contacts can build vital bridges between cultures in helping us to understand and respect the differences of other peoples.

What kind of education is needed for collective survival in a pluralistic and interdependent world? And what infrastructures do we need as an essential precondition of the management in peaceful and just fashion of today's so intricately and tightly interwoven global society?

To answer these questions, we should not be afraid to go outside conventional educational frameworks to look at the innovative and creative thinking that is emerging there.

Much of what is new and innovative about values and perceptions in the world today is not initiated in what is handed down by formal educational systems but comes from what is handed up from ordinary people, in expressions of their aspirations for a more decent, secure and equitable way of life. It is all part of a groping toward a human collectivity, a seeking of fresh answers for a different future - where the world's peoples and their leaders must learn to think of the human species as a single and indivisible unit comprising a global society of many cultures.

A great deal of rich and original thought is helping give such processes of change life and vigour. These are almost autonomous



processes, in the sense that the power of governments to control them is very limited. They are changing all our societies in very profound ways.

Among other things, the evidence of these new movements from below should be seen as proof that all of the turmoil of the Third World - and as one from that world I certainly concede there is great turmoil - is not simply due to decay, corruption or inability to govern democratically. It is as often as not a result of the impact of these new voices, asking for their rightful place in the human order. Such demands, however, can test and strain the institutional capacities of nations. New instrumentalities of management, and more effective ways of educating one another, will have to be devised - lest we slide into more and more senseless violence bred by poverty, degradation and despair.

Americans, almost more than any other people, ought to recognize the significance of incorporating such calls for recognition into national agendas. The civil rights movement in this country in the 1960s and 1970s, the women's movement and the environmental movement - indeed much of the history of this country - have been manifestations of these "voices from below".

In the same sense, it has to be remembered that this country has led the way in establishing the universal acceptance - if sadly not the practice - of human rights. The American people should take rightful pride in the very important lead they have given to the quest for human solidarity and justice.

Traditionally, efforts in educational innovation have focused on the application and critical examination of new methods and technologies, and the training of people to handle them. There has been something of a tendency to look at education statically as if society was not changing in its needs, its psychology, its aspirations and choices. Clearly this is not the case in today's world where we see a veritable transformation of values, perceptions, and power configurations.

Education therefore needs to build up a sensitivity to change as it strengthens its innovative capacity. Otherwise, it will be training for obsolescence. The capacity and the willingness of educators to take a hard look at their own educational systems over and beyond marginal criticism is going to be essential.

At the United Nations University, we have been investigating various new modes for sharing knowledge as well as the elaboration of learning materials to improve understanding of global problems. In one project, for example, we are attempting to develop an international village video network where villagers themselves without interlocutors record the story of their own development experience for showing in rural and other communities of other nations. We have also been exploring the possibilities of linking up existing distance learning systems in both developing and industrialized countries. Another project is studying more effective ways of disseminating scientific information to users at the local level in developing societies. Underlying these efforts is the broader question of learning about learning - how knowledge is, in fact, absorbed and how we can learn in different and more effective ways. An important recognition here is that pluralism, while a necessary and desirable condition of today's world, tends to increase cultural distance between cultures unless ways are



found to build bridges between them in constructing the infrastructure for listening to one another.

These efforts stem from our belief that the common survival of humanity in civility on this limited earth is going to require unprecedented levels of mutual understanding and tolerance and much higher levels of international and people-to-people co-operation than ever before. Our essential problem is how to develop an understanding of the commonality that we share in the problems of survival and stability. Like it or not, we have a common future. We will, all of us, have to work out our salvation in a moral context that encompasses the whole world.

When it came time to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Benjamin Franklin reminded his fellow revolutionaries that "We must all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately". In today's revolutionary world, where swift change is a constant of daily life, we should similarly recognize that we too must indeed all hang together in a belief in a world where we can respect each other's differences - or most assuredly we will hang separately in strife and destruction. Ben Franklin's words, I believe, pose very succinctly the responsible choice for the American people at today's global crossroads.

Thank you very much - and I wish this Assembly well in its very important deliberations.

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