

Personal and Social Responsibility  
in the Search for Mental Health

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-- SUMMARY --

The state of the world today is such that it can be described at the brink of madness, as mentally aberrant as, at the individual level, any person displaying an almost uncontrollable urge for self-destruction. Turbulence on a global scale of tensions and pressures constitutes the context in which we see increasing manifestations of mental illness everywhere.

Some of the worst victims are those that sane societies profess to love the most, the children. When children grow up with slaughter all around them, it is difficult to teach them such moral values as "do not Kill." In conflict-ridden societies, it is very difficult to raise people with the mental strength to be peace-loving.

The main social causes of threat to the world's mental health are at three fundamental levels: the disorderliness and violence of our age; the intractability of international poverty and inequality; and the rapidity of social change resulting from the development process itself.

A permutation in the human condition is required to overcome the world's mental illness. For this to take place we will have to develop a much greater capacity to empathize with others who are different.

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I am very honoured at the invitation to address the 1983 Congress of the World Federation for Mental Health. Let me first salute you on the occasion of your thirty-fifth anniversary. The federation has played a lead role in stressing the vital mental dimensions of the fully whole, healthy and productive individual, a reminder of that special attribute which gives humankind its intellectual remove from the rest of the species. In a crowded, competitive and fragile world often seemingly bent on its self-destruction, sanity and reason -- at least in a collective sense -- frequently seem to be rare and precious commodities.

In my remarks here today, I do not intend to dwell on various clinical manifestations of mental disorder. That is really not my parish. I would instead like to examine the mental health issue from the perspective of someone whose major preoccupations have been with issues of peace and development. In doing so, I would like to take off from the view expressed so well by your outgoing president in the December 1982 issue

of the American Journal of Psychiatry, where he observes that the mentally ill, like the rest of us, "are imbedded in social and cultural contexts which shape behaviour as surely as it is shaped by disease." And beyond those who suffer major mental disablement, in clinical terms, are the many hundreds of millions around the globe who are denied an environment of dignity, justice and civility necessary to the maintenance of full mental health.

One needs, however, to set mental health in its proper context. And that context, in my view, is simply that of a world at the brink of madness -- in the large, as mentally aberrant as, at the individual level, any person displaying an almost uncontrollable urge for self-destruction, an irrational refusal to cure his sickness with available technology, and an inexhaustible appetite for food and drink known to be noxious and deadly to the system. It makes almost a mockery of any attempt to define mental health and to determine the criteria of mental normality.

Various studies of the state of the present and future world -- the Brandt Commission reports on development, the Palme Commission report on security and disarmament, the US Government's Global 2000 report and many others -- all say essentially the same thing: we are at a "critical watershed period in human history."

But the situation is far more unstable and unpredictable than these studies warn us of -- for virtually all of our efforts to give us some kind of road map into the 21st century have seriously underestimated the synergistic and unsettling effect of change in our lives -- rapid, fundamental and unprecedented social and value changes throughout the world today.

This has set us into a situation of drift, fragmentation, and uncertainty, both socially and politically, in all dimensions of human life and at all levels of society -- the individual, the family, the village, the nation-state, regional groupings, or the international system.

All societies, the strong and the weak, are now exposed to many forces and processes beyond their control. This has led us down the pathway to irrational fears that we must somehow learn to manage lest we regress to a level of barbarianism and violence that would belie all of humanity's achievements and glories over the millenia.

One certain measure of the madness afflicting the world is the shadow of nuclear annihilation which we have cast over ourselves. Mutual fears and rivalry between the superpowers has led us to a situation in which we have lost political control over the arms race. We simply cannot go on for another 20 or 30 years and expect to survive precariously balanced on the brink of atomic holocaust where we are now poised. Already

we have a young generation who do not expect to live out their natural life span, an outlook which is bound to have an impact on their psyche.

Nor is our reliance on violence and arms limited to the superpowers. We have some of the most impoverished states in the world spending half their annual budgets on armaments. Death squads are taken to be the solution to political differences. Ethnic and religious tensions and Malthusian population pressures are flash points of sickening slaughter. It is well for any third world person to remind himself that some 130 wars have been fought in developing countries since World War II and most have been over internal differences, although these have been often aggravated by external interventions.

The readiness to use violence has been reinforced by purveyors of arms who profit from our fears of one another. We must somehow learn to manage our fears without constant resort to violence and striking out at shadows.

All of this turbulence, on a global scale, of forces and counter-forces, tensions and pressures, constitutes the context in which we see increasing manifestations of mental illness around the world.

For all the insanity that seems abroad in the world today, it is instructive, I believe, to note that there have been a few success stories -- communities or even whole societies in

which the mental health of the population is relatively better assured through greater social balance and more sympathetic cultural attitudes, and where violence and crime are reasonably under control. Japan, host nation of the United Nations University, is a good case in point. Historically, Japan had the cultural strength and coherence to selectively adopt what it felt was needed in adjusting to the realities and dictates of the modern world. There is in Japan today remarkably little street crime, particularly considering the high population densities that so often breed aggression and violence; one walks the streets of Tokyo in perfect safety. To be sure, Japan's social success in providing a reasonably humane and equitable environment has come at some cost in cultural isolation from the rest of the world; it is nonetheless a nation and a culture well worth studying by the mental health community.

Other instances might be cited of places around the world -- in parts of Asia and Africa -- where the contribution of traditions of mutual health within the community and of the extended family has been crucial to maintenance of the psychological equilibrium of members of the family. Family members who do become mentally afflicted will often be protected and cared for by the extended family.

But it must be emphasized that these sort of situations tend very much to be the exception not the rule in so far as

the prevalence of social causes of mental illness are concerned.

Some of the worst victims are those that sane societies profess to love and care for the most, the children. In Kampuchea, children are taught how to shoot a rifle by age 10, by age 12 they are on the battle lines. The only world they, and many other children around the world, have known and are likely to know for the foreseeable future is one of slaughter and violence. When such children are asked to draw pictures showing their vision of the future, they draw images of bombings, strafings and killings. Other children have spent stress-filled lives in camps for refugees and displaced persons.

When children grow up with slaughter all around them, it is difficult to teach them such moral values as "do not kill." One major conclusion of a study of Palestinian and Israeli children was that in conflict-ridden societies, with jingoistic attitudes encouraged and children victims of aggression, it becomes very difficult to raise people with the mental strength to be peace loving. The essential problem is how to grow up sane in an insane world.

The mental health of children is also imperiled by various forms of child labour, child abuse, and child exploitation that are as much a comment on the mental health of the perpetrator as that of the victim. Furthermore, it is not only the young

children, but also their older brothers and sisters on the brink of their adult careers whose mental health is seriously threatened by the circumstances of today's world. In many parts of the world, the only career offered is an empty, lonely and brutal life -- with little hope of ever finding a job or productive niche in society. The hopelessness of many youths has either turned them inward to drugs and the road to self-destruction or outward to aggressiveness and violence. The loneliness of such youths impels them to the viciousness and destructiveness of the gangs. Overdevelopment in the North and underdevelopment in the South have combined to create a situation where some tens of millions of youth face the prospect of no jobs anywhere on the horizon. At the other extreme is the existential emptiness of the affluent consumer society that also affects the state of mental health of the young.

Pervasive and deep-rooted poverty is a major contributor to mental illness in the world -- and by all indicators poverty as well as illiteracy will get worse as we move towards the 21st century. By the year 2000, it is estimated that some 800 million people will be living in absolute poverty. The debilitating effects of malnutrition among the poor increases as it is passed from generation to generation, with normal brain growth retarded by both pre-natal and post-natal malnourishment. We are developing a whole underclass of

physically and mentally stunted people in the world -- incapable of relating to life in any productive sense. Is such an underclass to be a permanent feature of modern society -- and, if so, what will this do to our political systems? What will it do to our sense of humanity and morality?

We have reached a state of human folly where nations stricken by hunger and poverty must pay as much as \$125 billion a year on their debts despite stagnating economies, declining incomes, starving populations, and massive unemployment in the developing world, with continuing idle production capacity in the industrialized world.

In some regions of the world we may well witness in the next two decades the collapse of whole economies, and even states, leading to violence, civil strife, external intervention, mass exodus, annexation and eventually the rewriting of the political geography of that region.

Already we have a flood tide of human migration, millions of people across the globe pouring into crowded cities and moving across national and continental boundaries to the areas of affluence and to the empty spaces of the world. In addition, there are more than 16 million refugees adrift around the world. This vast uprooting and resettlement of humanity has led to massive cultural and ethnic interpenetration on a global scale which is severely taxing social adjustment mechanisms in both rich and poor nations. These have raised

political, economic and cultural tensions leading to conflicts that erupt along the fault lines of race, ethnicity and religion, and not only that of class.

The flood of refugees and asylum and safe-haven seekers, moreover, is increasingly a crushing burden on the third world. The great flows in the past have been toward Europe and North America. Today, by contrast, it is estimated that more than 90 per cent of those fleeing are found in the developing world, and they are concentrated in the poorest of the developing countries; the overwhelming majority of them will remain there. Migration can, of course, lead to cultural enrichment, but when it is too large and too quick, as it is now, it simply overtaxes and overwhelms adjustment mechanisms.

Experts have been predicting megalopolitan growth in third world cities with populations upwards of 30 million by the end of the century. I think it much more likely that long before we get to such sizes, the social systems of these urban areas will have simply collapsed. Cities everywhere are already stuffed to a stage of near unworkability, with conditions that breed rage and violence. Some of the first victims again are the children; one WHO study has estimated that one out of every three children in the urban slums of the third world is mentally disturbed in some fashion. What has been happening in the ghettos of first world cities is only a precursor of far worse and more widespread trouble in the cities of the third

world. Violence, criminality, armed rebellion, and revolution have come to be seen as the only way of survival, the only response to unbearable injustice, neglect, oppression and a sense of powerlessness.

First of all, I think we can discern the social causes of the threat to the world's present and future mental health at three fundamental levels.

First, there are the threats deeply embedded in the disorderliness, injustice and violence of our age, a world where the time seems out of joint. What is terrifyingly unique about the present world situation is that the fact of rapid and fundamental social change has been combined with the build up of a destructive capacity that can destroy all life. A concerted effort to work toward a saner society, at the national and global level, is an essential condition of the mental health of generations to come. We dare not forget our common obligation to the future of humankind.

Second, apart from the question of our survival, the greatest threat to mental health and a major breeder of mental illness in terms of scale, intractability and complexity, is the international poverty and inequality that is the basis of underdevelopment and much population movement.

Third, the rapidity of social change that results from the development process, but is also autonomous, is a major source of pressure on mental health; this is true of developing and

developed societies alike. The very rapid scientific and technological advances characteristic of the past century has already put great stress on the adjustment capacity of individuals and societies and this seems bound to increase almost exponentially. We very much need to enhance our individual and collective capability for resilience in order to cope with the impact of rapid and pervasive social and cultural change.

These then are the three levels at which we must mount our attack on the social causes of mental illness. All three are obviously closely interrelated, for much of the violence and injustice of our time is bred in the poverty and misery of the many millions who live in a state of underdevelopment that must be overcome.

In coping with mental health problems at these three levels, we will somehow have to devise more humane, compassionate and just systems of social organizations and governance that enhance and not impede the capacity of the human race to deal creatively with rapid change. This will call for efforts at rebuilding community life and the strengthening of social solidarity to combat the depersonalization, isolation and atomization of so much of modern urban existence. We need better social arrangements and institutions to deal with the protection of the most vulnerable against the loneliness and uncertainty experienced, say, by

rural women newly arrived in the city. We will require alternative urban strategies, new and more sustainable urban-rural configurations that will help reduce the human cost and mental strain caused by structural change. We need to give support to various voluntary organizations, either traditional or new, which might help individuals adjust to radical changes in their familiar life situations and their value systems. New social policies are required to help prevent an increase in mental illness resulting from both the lack of development or the disorientations that accompany rapid development.

There is, for example, the cruel mental toll that malnutrition exacts from children -- condemning them, if they survive at all, to a life of mental apathy, social withdrawal and educational failure. As we seek to attack malnourishment, we need to keep in mind that apart from any programme of supplementary feeding, early mental stimulation will also be required. Health ministries, for example, rarely consider the importance of sensory stimulation to the growth of the mind, by, say, budgeting for low-cost eye glasses for poor children with sight defects.

In another area there is the question of housing. Low-cost housing projects have led in many instances to the break up of the extended family and the psychological support system it provided. They have also impacted negatively on employment opportunities in the informal sector and on the

maintenance of community spirit and patterns of mutual help. For lack of proper planning and by externalizing social and human cost we have paid a high price in human stress.

It is now obvious that there is a need either to build low-cost housing containing community areas and three generation homes or to make arrangements whereby the third generation can be housed in the neighbourhood. This is a particularly important concern in light of the so-called "greying of society," in which it has been estimated that about one-tenth of the world population in the year 2000 will be over 60 years of age. This trend is already taxing the social service capacities of governments. Correctly designed housing could help relieve the social costs of taking care of the elderly as well as young children.

The greying of society also raises the profound question of increased leisure time. Mental deterioration is not any inevitable accompaniment to the aging process. But fear, isolation, loneliness, and a sense of being a useless burden can bring on mental problems. There is need to think about security and recreation facilities that might be provided in low-cost housing or facilities for other socially productive use for the elderly.

In yet another area, we have observed that as migrants move into the cities, they often rely for help in adjusting and finding jobs on groups of people organized either in patterns

of kinship or regional solidarity. Voluntary organizations like this should be part of any systems that aims to help deal with the stresses of development.

We need more effective ways of helping individuals and families to cope with the wrenching pain of separation, isolation, disorientation and loss of identity resulting from the collapse of familiar life situations and value configurations, a tragic syndrome affecting the many millions who leave their home villages or home lands as well as the millions who are left behind. Two kinds of families have been identified as being particularly prone to mental health problems -- incomplete families and families under the stress of illness, separation or other strain, obviously the sort of families resulting in many instances from migration.

In the end, of course, it is the enhancement of resilience -- both of groups and of individuals -- through a continuing individual and collective social learning process that will help them cope with the inevitable stress that arises from rapid social change. Such an enhanced social learning capacity of individuals and societies will increase the capacity of our cultures and institutions for continuous re-interpretation and adaption and creative flexibility without loss of sense of identity and pride.

But there should also be opportunities for development of the inner resources of the human spirit -- through the arts,

through religion, through the ability to laugh. Widening and institutionalizing the range of channels for expression, in community, would enhance resilience and the capacity to maintain mental health under the stresses of development and change. It will also strengthen the sense of essential values and the structure of meaning that people require to maintain their own orientation and sense of authenticity and their own orientation. These are socio-cultural questions that the mental health community, by and large, has not devoted much time to -- yet they are essential to the achievement and maintenance of mental health in a period of rapid social change.

The increasingly crowded cities further raise the problem of population density and how we will be able to live in a constant narrowing of personal space. This is bound to lead to stress -- especially in societies where privacy and individualism are highly valued. Learning to develop our inner space to compensate for loss of external space will involve calling on those same inner resources of the human spirit to enhance our capacity to find beauty and truth and to enjoy them in the tranquility of the soul. What I have in mind here approaches the Augustinian plea, "inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te" -- "our heart cannot be quieted until it may find repose in thee." It seems to me that unless we

make some such quest in a highly crowded world, we run the risk of turning out like Skinner's famous rats.

But it is really only a very few people -- the artists, the writer, the mystic -- who can develop the structures of self-directed living on their own. Most of us do not have that capacity. It is the larger environment, which we all shape, that provides the structure of meaning for most of us. Thus the degree of mental health in the world, I believe, will ultimately be determined by the cultural and ecological environment we share together. Seen in this light, mental health might be defined as the full capacity to development and realize oneself in community.

As human beings are thrown back more and more on their own inner resources, in the context of changing life situations, many are responding with renewed religiosity. This response can take two basic, and very differing, directions, each with a profound impact on society. One direction is a flight into familiar religious rituals, legalisms or moral certitude. The second is a more creative response that is the translation of the transcendental meaning of human existence into social life. Reflecting an awareness of the end of the long process of secularization and the beginning of the return of the sacred, this could also be the beginnings of a revitalization of a major source of social, cultural and moral creativity and innovation.

The human being is a constantly evolving organism, mentally and physically. The answers that we supply in the next few decades will determine whether this evolution moves us backwards to a new barbarianism or forward to a peaceful, humane, equitable and mentally vigorous and creative future. We will need to find answers to questions like:

- How can we learn to manage our fears about those who seem different from us -- and come to recognize the essential humanity in all of us?

- How can we live in a world in which pluralistic hopes and values flourish, and still maintain the social coherence and moral foundations for healthy growth?

- How can we learn to live without the compulsion of needing enemies in this crowded and fragile world, a notion that we have lived with, and quite logically, since the first moments of human evolution?

That is asking a lot, but we really seem to have no other choice in a global society which has permitted its evolution to the present point of intolerable injustice, hunger and poverty of millions, blind and savage violence, and the ability to extinguish itself and all life on earth. Our ability to deal with our problems rationally, to excuse evil on grounds of economic convenience, ethnic homogeneity or ideological purity, is, in my view, a manifestation of mental illness.

Wars down through the centuries have brought us many horrors -- but they have also been the occasion to bring out some of the best in humankind. But war is all finished, it must be all finished given the destructive capacities of the weaponry we have built for ourselves. Do we then have the socially innovative drive and the spirit to develop an alternative to war -- to take those energies now devoted to belligerency and channel them into an effort to overcome poverty, end misery and injustice, and halt our use of violence and cease our destruction of the environment? There is a saying in Javanese which somehow captures the notion of what is needed: "Mamayu Hayuning Bawono" -- which is to say, "to bring out the beauty of the world."

For this kind of permutation to take place in the human condition, we will simply have to develop a much greater capacity to empathize with others who are different -- different ages, different colours, different sex and different cultural, social and ideological views. If one definition of mental health is the capacity to develop in community -- the social responsibility in the search for mental health -- then an equally absolute condition of full mental well-being is the capacity to love, to give and to share, the personal responsibility in the search. Mental health thus needs to be seen across the continuum from the individual to the collective which defines the state of the human condition.

To acquire this capacity to love one another across our differences, like all human relations, requires time -- and time is the scarcest commodity in this rapidly changing world. But as Barbara Ward said, we will have to learn to love one another, or we will all perish. I am also reminded of the old story of the man who was told by his gardener that new trees in his garden would take 50 years to mature -- to which he replied, "Well, then plant them this afternoon." We too must begin, together, to plant this afternoon.

It is well too to remind ourselves that the present rapidity and vastness of change, as disturbing as it may be, also contains the potential for a better society, if we but take up the challenge. The time may well be out of joint, but we cannot, like Hamlet, curse the fact that we were born to set it right -- for it is our responsibility to the future. If we can harness science and technology for creative purposes, if we can learn to manage our fears, if we can learn not to see the world in terms of them and us, and if, above all, we can achieve a clearer awareness of the essence of humanity, then we can hope to turn the corner toward a much brighter and just world.

All this will be no easy task but it is time we began alerting the global society that as disconcerting and troubling as change is, it is a normal part of development and growth. It is better to let people know that things are going to hurt

for a while before they get better. Alfred North Whitehead's words are very pertinent here:

"It is the business of the future to be dangerous..... The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur."

A recognition that somewhere ahead there could be a greater good arising from the present turmoil could be very important in keeping alive in the human consciousness the flame of hope. Hope is an immensely important commodity, it is the very stuff of which human resilience is created. In moving beyond the purely welfare and curative aspects of mental health -- however important they may be -- we need to keep in mind the potential there is for a better society if we can but imbue our efforts with the right dream and with persistence. This we cannot leave to government or to international agencies. Each of us has the individual task of striving for a saner, less violence prone and more just world. Each of us can be messengers of hope.

At the United Nations University we have no specific projects on mental health -- but, in a very real sense, concerns for improvement of the mental health of the global community thread through all our work, whether it is devoted to peace and conflict resolution, development in a changing world, or science and technology in the cause of human advancement. Those are the three major thrusts of the work of the University and I think they can be seen as very closely allied to the

three levels of socially rooted threat to the global status of mental health which I perceive -- that is, violence and injustice, underdevelopment, and the disorientation of rapid social growth. Let me also say that we now have a very direct personal link to the World Federation for Mental Health. I began my remarks with reference to your outgoing president, Dr. Brody. Let me close with a few words about your President-elect, Dr. Aldaba-Lim, for she comes to your leadership virtually direct from six years service to the United Nations University as a member of our governing Council. The University greatly benefited from the wisdom, acuity and compassion she brought to her responsibilities and, of course, like all former Council members, we consider her very much a member of the UNU family. I am sure the World Federation will be kept well apprised of areas of common concern with the UNU.

If humankind is to keep off the pathway toward barbarianism and a new dark ages without hope, we will need much love and compassion and empathy -- and these are commodities that you, who work with the mentally ill, have in ample share. I feel humble before you in addressing any prescriptions. Your willingness to give of yourselves to help our less fortunate fellow companions on this planet is a precious value in this consumer-oriented, "me-first" world we live in. Yours is the sort of experience that will be badly needed in helping all of us to think together about ways to

facilitate the search for mental health -- both personally and in community. Thank you very much and I wish this Congress much success.

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systems - needs

FUSCHL - complexity

undecidable system

syn. program.  
draft a number of questions & the.

Gen Smith

biolog. metaphors

- human much: chemically triggered  
genetic coding:

metaphors  
complexity

→ ratio state

- at a time when most nations  
are not stable.

→ looking  
too small.

order along the line of problems

problem centered process.

doom  
scenario: if total world ex. collapse  
nuclear annihilation  
100 age.

→ diff. units etc.

- select curriculum of UNH.  
why certain dept.?

govt. problem:  
small scale participation  
how to link.