

Dialogue between cultures based on universal values

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Thank you. I'm delighted to be here today, and grateful for the invitation to share my thoughts and experiences with you on the topic of values for peace and intercultural understanding, which, I must confess, are very close to my heart.

I would particularly like to thank the University of South Australia for organising this wonderful forum.

As we know, the global landscape has changed in recent times for all of us, making the themes of this forum more timely and relevant than ever before.

It's ironic that the terrorist attack in New York occurred on Tuesday September 11 - also the international day of peace which no one seems to have commented on in the media. Since then we've heard very little about peace but much about war.

It's even more ironic that the very week before the September 11 terrorist attacks, representatives from nations all around the world gathered in two places:

One, at the international anti racism conference in Durban, South Africa, discussing what it is that we wish to move away from (namely racism, discrimination, racial hatred and xenophobia) in the southern hemisphere,

And on the other side of the world, in the northern hemisphere in Geneva, at the same time, ministers of education and senior officials from over 188 countries met for the first time in 5 years, at the international conference on education, the theme of which was: education for all for learning to live together - in other words, what we seek to move towards - namely living together in peace and harmony - an ideal towards which we should never cease striving to reach, and never make the mistake of slipping back into complacency.

You may know that last year was the international year for a culture of peace, and this year is the first year of a decade, dedicated by the UN to a culture of peace and non violence for the children of the world.

This year is also the international year for mobilisation against racism, and if that weren't enough, it's also the international year for a dialogue among civilisations, inspired by Samuel Huntington's controversial book: A Clash of Civilizations, in which he proposes that conflicts and clashes between cultures and civilisations are the greatest threat to world peace, and are likely to dominate the future of world politics. He further proposes that the world's major conflicts will be across civilisational and religious lines, which we are unfortunately witnessing as we speak, in the Balkans, in the Middle East and regrettably in our own neighbourhood.

From this conglomeration of international years, all emphasising the need for peace, intercultural dialogue and freedom from racism and conflict, one can gauge the very high priority that the international community places on the need to find ways to live together in harmony, a priority that we here in Australia also share in a society, made up of indigenous, eastern, western and middle eastern cultures, speaking over 120 languages, representing all the world's major religious faiths, and in which a very high proportion of people come from diverse cultural traditions.

One could say that we have the united nations right here in our backyard, and that we are free to

express our diversity but also strive to be united by a commitment to a shared framework for living together as citizens, embodied in our constitution, our democratic processes, our laws and so on. Whether this occurs in practice of course is another matter.

[overhead transparency re Australian framework]

The Australian citizenship council conducted a survey of the community to develop a “compact” for living together in harmony based on 7 core Australian civic values (to distinguish from personal values) :

- Recognition of the unique status of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples commitment to the land,
- The rule of law,
- Representative liberal democracy,
- Principles of tolerance & fairness
- Acceptance of cultural diversity

Recently I returned from the international conference on education in Geneva, on learning to live together, which I mentioned earlier.

Throughout the conference was repeatedly emphasised the necessity for a global ethic and shared values for living together successfully in a globalised world, but also repeatedly emphasised was that learning to be - to understanding oneself is an essential pre requisite for learning to live together and for effective dialogue to occur across civilisations and cultures.

Given the long history of violence as a means of resolving conflicts among cultural and religious groups, the UNESCO Delors report on education for the 21st century placed learning to live together, not simply as one of the four pillars of education for the future, but as the greatest challenge facing education in the 21st century.

It insisted that every national education system give priority to learning to live together, by children developing an understanding of themselves and others, by strengthening their own cultural identity and appreciating that of others, learning to manage conflicts and live in an interdependent world, in a spirit of respect for cultural pluralism, mutual understanding, peace and harmony.

UNESCO further argues that educational reforms should systematically focus on creating unity within diversity by developing the basic human values which underlie most cultures and major religions of the world and are embodied in the universal declaration of human rights.

However it's not that simple to identify nor to agree upon what are those values that we share as human beings which can serve to unite us.

We may find some clues among the commonalities between the great religions of the world.

Values which can form a universal secular culture which transcends, without negating or denying, individual faiths and cultures, but which in fact draws on the best, the highest, the noblest of all of them.

We can look to certain international documents to guide us, such as the universal declaration of human rights and other agreements relating to civil, political and other rights, responsibilities and freedoms.

A UN report entitled *Developing a global ethic for building a culture of peace based on shared values and respect for diversity* identifies the following universal values as being necessary for peace:

- Freedom

- Equality, equal opportunity
- Democracy
- Peace
- Human rights
- Pluralism, diversity
- Mutual respect, dignity
- Individual worth
- Responsibility

It's interesting to note that in a small survey conducted among South Australian school communities the following common core values were identified however with differing emphases:

Caring, mutual respect, responsibility, equity, valuing diversity, trust/ honesty/integrity, self-worth/ self-esteem, success/ excellence/ quality, creativity, cooperation/ teamwork.

Some of these are also what we might call personal values or qualities to which we might aspire.

The UNICEF living values education program identifies 12 such universal values:

Peace, respect, love, happiness, freedom, honesty (trust), humility, tolerance, cooperation, responsibility, simplicity, unity.

I would venture to say that those values are already inherent within all of us, simply because we are human beings. However the emphasis placed on various values in each culture may be slightly different.

Some of the keys to having those values emerge from within us, are self understanding, authenticity and peace within ourselves, so those values become integrated into our own lives, underpinning who we are - our very identity, which some would say is love, and we all know how powerful love and unconditional acceptance can be.

So that by living and being those values, it is possible to also draw it forth from others - call them to their finest qualities.

Dialogue

It may be useful for today's purposes to be clear about what we mean by "*dialogue*" whether that be among civilisations, cultures, religions, belief systems, different interest groups, or whatever.

But to engage in genuine dialogue is not about seeing others as being categories of peoples, nor about the allocation of certain stereotyped characteristics to people as a group or a block or a monolith - people are not monoliths - any society, culture or civilisation is made up of people, of individuals who belong to families, who are someone's son or daughter, who are sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, work colleagues. All capable of feeling and expressing the full range of emotions, including love and compassion, who for the most part want a safe and fulfilling life for themselves and for their children.

To categorise others, is to focus on their difference rather than on their similarity to us all as human beings, fellow members of humanity, living together on this small planet.

And while there are indeed many differences between us which can enrich us all, if we would only choose to understand each other and to learn from difference, it is in fact those similarities which can unite us as one human civilisation, with values which we agree to share, while expressing our rich diversity of beliefs and lifestyles.

So what do we mean by *dialogue*?

Dialogue usually means talking with others or conversation which can be social or superficial and not terribly meaningful sometimes.

Much more than conversation is needed for genuine and deep understanding and empathy to occur between people who may have very different beliefs, values, customs, appearance and behavioural mores - and particularly where language and verbal communication may be a barrier.

No, something far more profound and meaningful than mere words is needed to create the experience of true understanding, to bridge generations of separation and otherness, fear and distrust, to overcome deep seated assumptions that are locked into visual images and symbols rich with meaning which register deep within us, below the level of our conscious awareness, bypassing the intellect and triggering irrational emotional reactions of fear, hatred and even loathing.

These days we're bombarded with very powerful visual images. One only has to recall the image of the second aircraft crashing into the world trade centre tower which we have seen on our screens maybe dozens of times - now deeply ingrained in our memory, as are the distressing personal stories of people who have lost loved ones, who only moments before death called them to say how much they loved them, followed closely by other frequent images of men in turbans holding guns menacingly, ostensibly in training to kill westerners.

We are now witnessing the impact that such images can have in manipulating the thoughts and emotions of those who have subsequently harassed innocent Muslim women and children in our very own neighbourhoods.

How can dialogue overcome and bypass these powerful evokers of unconsciously held fears, even in the most enlightened among us?

Genuine dialogue requires two way communication and both/all parties need to be willing to engage in it:

Firstly, to speak authentically, not just from the head, so that we sound smart and clever, but also from the heart, revealing what lies beneath the surface, exposing who we really are, transcending our persona, our status, our position, and cultural expectations, sharing our hopes, our fears our deeply held aspirations to create a better world - one in which love, beauty, gentleness, honesty, respect and compassion prevail.

Speaking of what is truly important to us, has us discover to our immense surprise, that others also consider those same things to be important, no matter how different they may seem.

Secondly, but more importantly is genuine listening, while suspending all judgement, assessment and evaluation, but listening with full acceptance of the person before us and giving total attention not just to the words, but listening for meaning and understanding, listening for feeling, listening for the essence of who the person really is - seeing past their form, past their physical appearance and hearing past their accent - tuning into a deeper level of open hearted communication which may involve visualising and imagining how it must be for this person, how it might feel to be in their shoes or circumstances.

Now this all sounds very obvious and easy, but to truly understand others we first need to understand ourselves, to explore our own identity and the motivations for why we do and say the things we do, and to explore our personal values - to really know what is most important to us and to live authentically by that - and not all of us do that. And we haven't learned to do that - unless we've made an enormous effort as adults to teach ourselves.

I'd like to add another level to the power of dialogue and that is listening for learning and for fulfilling potential - asking oneself while listening - what am I learning from this dialogue? How does the

different way in which this other person is seeing, doing, thinking, experiencing and being in the world - what is this teaching me about myself? How can this help me expand my repertoire of thinking, doing, being etc to fill out who I am, to become more fully who I have the potential to become.

What I've noticed over the years from working with people from so many different cultures, is how much I continue to learn from the richness of that exposure, in particular to the different ways of thinking and seeing the world, which has expanded my own thinking in ways that I would never have imagined possible.

I liken it to the opening of the many petals of a flower - as each person contributes something new to me, it adds to who I can be and as a result I am becoming more fully who I have the potential to become. Those that are different from me have strengths that I don't have, and can see things in ways that I can't see them, and through their sharing I come to see the world through their eyes and be enriched as a result. And I trust that others may in turn experience this and be enriched when I share who I am with them.

To me this is the essence of genuine dialogue for the betterment of us all. The challenge however, is two fold. Firstly, for both parties to want to engage in genuine dialogue, because it's a two way process. And secondly, to find or to create appropriate opportunities for authentic dialogue to take place and this can occur every day in every way - any time any place.

But we are challenged to go deeper through our dialogue, to understand the diverse systems of thinking, world views and cultural paradigms held by other cultures - to experience and understand different ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being in the world and seeing the world from different perspectives, through different eyes, standing in another's shoes.

If the generations who follow us, are to envisage different futures, and entertain diverse possibilities for sharing a future together, in ways which enable well being for all, and for the preservation of natural life and resources, they will need to examine the many complex problems that we have unwittingly created, from many diverse perspectives, to be able to come up with workable solutions. As Einstein is reputed to have said: "one cannot solve a problem from the same system of thinking which created it."

In Australia, we have the opportunity to learn and benefit from many diverse cultural perspectives and different approaches to problem solving, which when brought together, may well contain the key to solutions as yet not conceived, including the discovery of perhaps surprising and unorthodox paths to both inner peace and intercultural understanding, reconciliation and harmony externally, in Australia and further afield.

This search may lead us from identity to interdependence and to unity in our diversity.

Peace to you all - thank you.