



## **From United Nations to United People: From the Brink of Disaster to a Future of Dignity**

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**Abstract:** First paragraph: When I hear the saying “light at the end of the tunnel” I like to ask, “where's the tunnel?”

The Golden Rule according to Pittacus in 650 BC was “do not to your neighbour what you would take ill from him.” This simple, direct and imaginative thought, is well known through history. We hear from the Mahabharat, "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause you pain if done to you," 300 BCE. And from Jesus of Nazareth in 30 BC, or the 13th of the Christian era, “Do to others as you would have them do to you”. And the same idea/teaching continues through Islam, through Judaism, and through the Nine Faith Groups with whom I had the privilege of serving during my work as moderator for the World Conference on Religions and Peace.

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idea/teaching continues through Islam, through Judaism, and through the Nine Faith Groups with whom I had the privilege of serving during my work as moderator for the World Conference on Religions and Peace.<sup>4</sup>

Following this, I want to start by quoting Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell who in 1955 told us “Remember your humanity, forget the rest,”<sup>5</sup> and today I sadly read in the Daily Telegraph “tell us about your love life or we'll kick you out; Israel warns visitors to the West Bank,” As foreigners visiting the West Bank must tell Israel if they fall in love with a Palestinian on the new rules that will

significantly increase Israel's control over those living under military occupation.

And I referred the other day in conversation to the emotion-scape, not the landscape but the emotion-scape, and I feel genuinely, I mean who I might to say it, but I do feel that we have to ask ourselves and I hope to speak for a few minutes and then invite you to put your questions because I don't think you want a monologue about the need for dialogue. The questions that I would put you and that I put to myself, include how can human dignity become a guiding framework for policies?

In the work of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICHI), I had occasion to engage with these themes as early as 1998—nearly a quarter of a century ago. The Commission's report at the time observed that “the human person in today's world is particularly vulnerable.”<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on the human person remains essential.

As Imam Ali eloquently expressed: “A person is either your peer in God's creation or your brother in faith.”<sup>7</sup> The same report also noted that “wars continue to plague developing countries.”<sup>8</sup> Since then, the nature of violence has shifted in scale and scope. Today, violence across the globe has proliferated in ways that may exceed even these so-called ‘wars’—including in my own region, where we have witnessed a major conflict every three years.

In many contexts today, torture is becoming institutionalized—as a tool of state control and repression. Weapons of indiscriminate destruction are used with increasing frequency in armed conflicts, while nuclear arms continue to hang over humanity like a modern-day sword of Damocles.

I served for twenty years with the Nuclear Threat Initiative, calling for a limitation on weapons of mass destruction to no avail. Meanwhile, starvation is still wielded as a method of silencing opposition, and the

control of civilian populations has become not only a tactic but often an explicit objective of armed conflict. I do not raise these realities to provoke anger, we are angry enough as it is, but rather to ask whether it is still possible to act within the system to redress injustice.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once observed, the world so often speaks in terms of fighting against something. I recall my fellow commissioners reflecting on this. Walter Sisulu asked: “Why is it that we always have to fight against something?” Yehudi Menuhin, from the northern hemisphere, added: “Why can't we struggle for something?” That led to the idea of creating a Parliament of Cultures, something we actually managed to bring into being. It existed for as long as our budget allowed, which was, admittedly, a shoestring budget.

When will we have a conversation that develops altruism, philanthropy and intellectual generosity towards the other? Unfortunately, even intellectual achievements are under lock and key today, are given as part of a merchandise, a commercial exercise rather reminiscent of the “Internet of Things.” Globalisation by definition has no culture to it, and the Internet of Things and the Internet of Matter is so important as it appears to us today.

I do not wish to delve into the etymology of the human axiom *axios*—the Greek term closest in meaning to the Latin word for dignity—but it is worth recalling that, in 1755, Samuel Johnson published his two-volume *Dictionary of the English Language*, in which he defined equality as “the same degree of dignity.” Dignity is first and foremost a search for the universal.

When properly understood and prioritised, dignity becomes the tool by which we transcend polarity—the cultivation of hatred, the posture of “I have spoken and therefore I am right, and all of you are wrong.” What we must seek instead, in any better world, is plurality: respect for the other, and what we

might define as creative commons (rather than polarity of hatred).

This region has a long history rooted in the demand for human dignity and the desire for agency over one's fate. The Arab Nahda, or Arab Renaissance, included what came to be known as the Syrian question, which evolved into the question of Palestine, but also, let us be frank, the questions of Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Bilad al Sham region was shaped by an early Arab inclination towards constitutionalism. In 1919, this vision took form in Damascus through the efforts of King Faysal and a group of Arab free thinkers, and reappeared briefly, in Egypt in 1928—until it was curtailed by imperial powers. Over time, it became increasingly clear that dealing with the “great powers” often meant engaging in transactions: the delivery of canals and waterways, arms deals, the training of militaries, and ultimately the promotion of those militaries to represent national movements.

I want to say that the people of West Asia and North Africa have experienced, on average, some form of warfare every three years. The burden of these wars extends beyond public and physical health to mental health, to the destruction of the environment and ecosystems, and to the obliteration of livelihoods. Museums, libraries, and cultural sites are targeted—along with all that sustains memory and conveys meaning to societies. Today, this region accounts for nearly half of the world's forcibly displaced people.

As I work with the Refugee Council in Canada, we are witnessing protracted refugee situations becoming the norm, rather than the exception, in the 21st century. Peaceful societies—sociospheres—must be built not on patronage, but on the enablement and empowerment of the vulnerable and the marginalised. They must also be grounded in a scientific understanding of what poverty truly means: Multiple Deprivation Index<sup>9</sup>.

To better understand what we are truly discussing, we have made efforts, through the

National Centre for Human Resources Development in Jordan, to address the human behind the statistic. Rather than simply saying, “You don't have a job because you're underqualified,” we must ask: “Why are you underqualified?” and “What is your home situation?” Humanising each step in the process is one of the key inspirational messages I would like to underline. In the words of Albert Einstein: “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.” That is what I have reminded myself after every devastating war—1967, 1973, the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, the Gulf War in the 1990s, and so forth.

This country has long served as a dumping ground for large numbers of people, people who, despite their displacement, have contributed to whatever we may now claim as a regional hub of stability. In the first chapter of *Winning the Human Race*, published in 1989, we defined humanitarianism as follows: “Humanitarianism demands that whatever detracts from human well-being must be questioned, regardless of its effects on economic growth, political power, or the stability of a certain ‘order.’”<sup>10</sup> We are so often told of the need to preserve world order—but I must ask, why can't world order include these imperative ethical points of departure?

Returning to the question: how can human dignity become a guiding framework for policies? I turn to Rudolf Kjellén, the German-Swedish founder of the German Geopolitical School, who coined the term geopolitics as early as 1899. He spoke of Geopolitik (Geopolitics) as the problems and conditions within a state arising from its geographic features; Ecopolitik (Ecopolitics) as the economic factors that affect the power of the state; and Demopolitik (Demopolitics) as the nation's ethnic and social elements, and the challenges they may pose. I would like to believe that these elements do not pose problems without also offering us possibilities for solution. During my time with the Club of Rome, we were reminded at

every meeting that we should present both a problematic and a resolute. We do not wish to curse the darkness; we aim to light a candle.

To Kjellén, the state “is a biological creature or life form with its own dynamic and logic, power and will.”<sup>11</sup> And that will includes us all, of course, for we are part of what we now call the state. But is it not true that, since COVID-19 and the past two years of isolation that followed, loneliness has increased? Remoteness has increased. The obfuscation of key issues—including education and health—has left us bewildered as to what the next directive may be. It is only then that we begin to realise that perhaps the organic unity of land and people—an organism with body and soul, and a personality on the international stage—is being reduced to something very small.

COVID transcended borders, international borders, and yet, here in our region, thought itself does not transcend borders. With all due respect to the innovations of communication and technology, I do not believe thoughts are being conveyed in a way that allows us to meaningfully dialogue our future. A few days ago, I noticed the BBC picked up on our reintroduction of philosophy into Jordanian schools. They interviewed a woman who was, quite evidently, entirely against the idea. I say this with some embarrassment: we have not taught philosophy in our schools for over forty years. Instead of explaining that *philo* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom) are precisely what we seek, she insisted that we already have enough on our plate in terms of religious education—and therefore have no need for analogy-based learning. I cannot accept the notion that “the living being has killed and described that is infected by internal conflict, polarisation and indignation, with no decay if left to its own devices.” We must open our minds. As Einstein once said: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

I agree with the concept of the Mashreq, or the Levant, as we are sometimes called, where the sun rises. As Descartes once asked, "If everything in this world was West, where

does the sun rise?" The Mashreq is, and I say this with conviction, a deeply diverse place, both religiously and ethnically. Yet people are retreating into the comfort of smaller and louder identities; identities built in opposition to others. What we need now is an understanding of inclusive security, and the promotion of a collective sense of citizenship and responsibility. How do we achieve this? At the very least, by defining what we mean when we speak of "landscape" and "emotions cape." I want to take you on a journey of such definition.

Halford John Mckinder asserted that whoever commands the world island encompassing Afro-Eurasia commands the world. The heartland is the centre of the world stretching from the Russian Volga River to China's Yangtze River and from the Himalayas to the Arctic. The Arabian Peninsula under the event is the only bridge connecting Africa to Europe and to Asia. The heartland and therefore is a historical site of entanglement and critical intercontinental gateway.<sup>13</sup> If you look from the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, up towards the Black Sea, up to all the Adriatic and then follow the rivers all the way up to the Balkans, what do you see? You see an inflated oval, and this is the interconnection between Asia and Europe which is often called Eurasia.

The point I'm trying to make is that there are reasons why the world visits itself upon us on a regular basis, and those reasons are material. I don't need to restate them here, because this is not a political meeting. They are not human reasons that I would state—because the dignity of human beings must be considered in the context of a larger question: how do we replace the doctrine of dispensability with an ethic of human solidarity?

Many people find it easy to recognise the dignity of members of their own class, their own faith, their own race, or their own culture. Throughout history, humans have divided themselves into an in-group—who enjoy dignity and value—and an out-group, who are given second-class status at best. We

often hear Western leaders speak of "Western values," but I have yet to hear one explain what that means. And let us remember: in some parts of this region, it is no longer fashionable to love your neighbour as yourself.

Many people see forms of intolerance—including xenophobia and religious exclusion—as the norm in today's world, particularly in this region. So, what do we do? We turn inward, repeating slogans like "Jordan first," "Iraq first," "Syria first"—each insisting on being first. But is there any possibility of escaping the dark humor of the caricature that says, "I want peace," and means instead, "a piece of Jordan, a piece of Syria, a piece of Iraq"? And when we look further toward East Africa, we must remind ourselves that Ferdinand de Lesseps did exist, and he did build a canal.<sup>14</sup>

Power talks. To place human welfare and dignity firmly at the centre of individual and collective concerns would be to realise an ethic of human solidarity. Some would say, "God forbid," instead of endorsing an ethic of exclusion.

An ethic of human dignity gives rise to politics that respect each person, in contrast to our current politics, where individuals are considered expendable or dispensable for any number of reasons. Poverty, as a form of violence against human beings and their dignity, is multi-dimensional. Traditional measures of national income—such as GDP per capita—have failed entirely to capture the simultaneous deprivations in health, education, and living standards that a person may face.

I hope that, in your group sessions, you may wish to return to the concept of the multidimensional poverty index. A framework for the ethics of human solidarity includes the responsibility to examine and attempt to understand the full range of consequences of our actions, and to avoid one-dimensional thinking.

We have too much specialised thinking in our part of the world: I have many letters after my name, and thus I am considered specialised in a certain aspect of health, education, or whichever field it may be. But to practice what might be called "joined-up handwriting"—that is, interdisciplinarity—I cannot understand why, for example, the W-E-F-E cluster (Water, Energy, Food and Environment) is not considered as one. The justifying reasons—the causalité, as the French say—for legislative cohesion must come before the promulgation of law. Too often, one of the sectors within that cluster believes its priorities are more important than the others.

If we are to engage with the climate change process and benefit meaningfully from the hundreds of billions in pledged funds, we must present a unified case—one that acknowledges how we fail to transcend our institutional silos. That, in my view, is what the United Nations must address. I recommend to you a paper by Sandeep Waslekar, Director of the Strategic Foresight Group in Mumbai, where he speaks of the urgent need not for United Nations, but for United Peoples—because it is nations, not peoples, who continue to compromise the rights of future generations by avoiding conversations about their future. "A land without a people for a people without a land"—that does not ring true to me, and so I would like to remind you, and remind myself: we must make every effort to minimise harm, and to compensate the sufferers when harm is unavoidably generated in pursuit of a competing good.

To exercise discernment in the face of unintended consequences for harm is vital. Justifiable actions may hurt some people. However, it is essential to acknowledge any harm for what it is, rather than insisting that it is acceptable simply because it could not be avoided.

Thank you

## ENDNOTES

1. Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 1:76.
2. Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva, Section 113, Verse 8. See Kisari Mohan Ganguli, trans., *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, vol. 13 (Calcutta: Bharata Press, 1883–1896).
3. Holy Bible. Luke 6: 31 (Catholic Bible)
4. World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), *Declaration of the Nine Religious Traditions*, Kyoto Assembly, 1970. See also: “World Conference on Religion and Peace,” *Religions for Peace*, accessed June 2025, <https://rfp.org>.
5. Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell, *The Russell–Einstein Manifesto*, issued in London, July 9, 1955.
6. Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, *Winning the Human Race* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 11.
7. Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, *Nahj al-Balagha (The Peak of Eloquence)*, trans. Sayed Ali Reza (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1985), Letter 53.
8. Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, *Winning the Human Race* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 15.
9. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2024. 2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): Poverty amid conflict. New York
10. *Ibid.*, 5.
11. Rudolf Kjellén, *The State as a Living Organism*, in *Introduction to Geopolitics*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Sloan (London: Routledge, 2017), 45.
12. Albert Einstein, quoted in *What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview by George Sylvester Viereck*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929.
13. Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–437.
14. In reference to Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805–1894), the French diplomat and engineer best known for his central role in developing the Suez Canal.