
Panelist's Remarks

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Ashok Khosla in a penetrating article titled "Whither Conservation?" (1997) anticipates in paradigmatic fashion the central issue that underlies the subject being addressed by this panel today, namely: "What are the requirements for a humane future within the context of global values?" He continues: "The fundamental ethical issue of conservation is, of course, 'why do we wish to conserve our fauna and flora?' Is it for the practical benefit of mankind, or is it for the intrinsic right-to-life of all living things? . . . Sooner rather than later," he continues, "the conservation movement will have to work out a better balance between those of its constituents that believe in concepts such as 'sustainable use' and those who are driven by a 'reverence for life'."

I would submit that governments, corporations, social and religious institutions, and each one of us personally, must also address that same question if there is any hope whatsoever that the future of the global community can be characterized as humane—a society marked by compassion, sympathy, and consideration for both our fellow human beings and other creatures. The fundamental ethical issue facing the entire world community, therefore, is whether or not we can evolve a global society in which all peoples as well as nonhuman creatures are viewed as having inherent value, and are thus treated with the kind of respect and consideration we so fervently desire for ourselves. In the so-called real world as we know it today, it seems far-fetched to imagine

a global society in which being humane is even so much as an operative goal, much less a realized ideal. Yet for all the remoteness and impracticability of such an ideal, it is an undertaking that must be engaged by each of us individually and, hopefully, by various segments of our global community as well.

There are obviously wide differences in how our various governments are established and controlled, as well as the responsibilities and benefits attending individual citizens of the communities or nations that such governments serve or exploit, or both. Surely we cannot place much confidence in a government which concentrates power in the hands of a few, by whatever name that political system is called. One of the basic requirements for a global humane future, therefore, is the evolving of governmental institutions and political structures that are chosen and controlled by broad segments of society, rather than by an elite few. Whether or not such governmental institutions shall ever become normative on a global scale is a question which cannot be answered in the affirmative at this point in time.

Likewise, the economic objectives and technological methodologies of corporations must become more socially responsible and environmentally friendly. In spite of the benefits to society made possible through science and technology, we are paying a terrible price in more ways than we can enumerate for these so-called advances. The two fundamental charac-

teristics of the current global economy are exploitation and consumption. Never mind that the advertising and promotion is packaged in ways that make many corporations appear like some local Salvation Army. We are, both wittingly and unwittingly, the victims of corporations which too often seek short-term profits at the expense of other values. Such unsustainable corporate development, in turn, is “green-washed” by their media outlets, which have become masters of manipulation and indoctrination.

If we are to succeed in our quest for a humane future, we must begin by embracing and nurturing values that place far less emphasis on consumption and much greater emphasis on conservation. The exploitation of our natural resources has reached a point where it is no longer regarded as fanatical to imagine a world that may not be capable of sustaining future generations. We must also begin to be considerably more honest in differentiating between want and need. James Gustave Speth (1997), administrator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reminds us that:

Desperation and despair are still the lot of many people. Some 1.3 billion people live in absolute poverty, with incomes of less than a dollar a day, and poverty is growing as fast as populations. . . . Over a hundred countries are worse off today than fifteen years ago. Each year 13 to 18 million people—mostly children—die from hunger and poverty-related causes. That computes to 1,700 human beings an hour—with only about 10 percent to 15 percent caused by emergencies.

What kind of changes in lifestyles and equity of distribution does this type of scenario portend? Can we even begin to imagine a world in which such suffering and devastation are no longer foregone realities? And finally, can we contemplate a humane future when such inequity exists and, according to Gus Speth, is getting worse rather than better?

One would hope that our educational institutions might be places of daring, challenge, and restraint to the kind of manipulation and

excesses promoted within our society. Yet such institutions—with a few exceptions—have themselves become the servants of big business. Academic budgets have become so dependent on corporate and governmental grants that the freedom to protest, challenge, and instruct is virtually nonexistent. More often than not, institutions of higher learning are institutions of indoctrination and persuasion rather than settings for intellectual inquiry and mental maturing. Higher education institutions must safeguard the freedom to challenge every form of exploitation and coercion, whether it be that of governments or corporations. Unless there is both academic and economic freedom within such institutions, we can little hope for a society that encourages protest and reform—the prerequisites of a humane future.

So also our religious institutions; indoctrination and affirmation rather than open inquiry and spiritual questing are the norms of most religious institutions. When serving as a Presbyterian clergyman several years ago, I regarded it as a bit ironic that within that tradition we observed once each year what we called “Brotherhood Sunday.” Somewhere it would seem we had lost the ideal that every Sunday should be Brotherhood Sunday and every day, Brotherhood Day. Finally, I cannot understand why most religious institutions place far greater emphasis on an other-world immortality rather than on a here-and-now concern for a creation under the threat of despoliation and destruction. In the religious tradition of my youth one of the hymns we sang with great gusto went something like this: “This world is not my home, / I’m just a passin’ through.” Perhaps now more than ever before is the anticipation of a “heavenly” salvation an inexcusable reason for not responding to the challenge to protect and enhance the biosphere which so generously sustains us daily, but which is even now being ravaged as never before in history. Too many religious institutions are failing to engender in their constituents any kind of passionate concern for the larger earth community which is, I suggest, the real “ground of our being.” Several years ago I had the opportunity to exchange views with then-Secretary of the Interior James Watt. Absolutely convinced that the second coming of Christ was imminent, Mr. Watt saw no rea-

son whatsoever to be concerned for the long-term preservation of our natural resources, especially the towering forests and the verdant plains which are even now being diminished and degraded. He was anticipating a new and different order, a conviction born of a religious dogma that was as imaginary as it is inane.

So can we, in the face of such obstacles and challenges, hope for a humane future? And are there, finally, global values which can help to secure such a future? However humane we might hope the global community will become, this must, I submit, begin with ourselves. In 1990 it was my privilege to have the opportunity to speak briefly to the great throng of people gathered on the Washington, D.C. Mall to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Earth Day. My theme for that occasion was a simple phrase that went like this: "Figure out what you care about, and live a life that shows it." I suggested that: "We can consume with conscience; we can, if we dare, foster regeneration; we can, if we share, extend to future generations the gift of life that has been ours to enjoy." And so once again, within the walls of this great institution called the World Bank, I challenge you to "Figure out what you care about, and live a life that shows it."

A humane future begins with you and me personally and extends from and through us to our families, our friends, and our business and social associates—and from there to those whom we, together with other like-minded persons, can influence to embrace values of caring, sharing, justice, and respect—not only for the peoples of this earth but for all living things. And though what we do individually may seem irrel-

evant and insignificant, the hope for a humane future rests, finally, not with governments, corporations, or institutions, but rather with individuals "who care enough to live a life that shows it."

Loren Eislely (1978) tells the story of an old man walking along a beach one day, when he notices a youth ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Finally, catching up with the young man, he asks, "Why are you doing this?" To which the young man responds, "If left on the beach till the noonday sun, they will surely die." "But," protests the old man, "the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish. How can your effort make any difference?" "Looking at the starfish in his hand and throwing it to the safety of the sea, the young man replies, "It makes a very real difference to this one." This parable, I believe, says it well. While we may not finally be able to "right" the entire world, we can at least impact some of its parts. We can, if we choose, live with the awareness that how we think and act will make a difference to someone or something, either for good or for ill. Let us strive, therefore, to so live and act that who we are and what we do will add to the healing of the world itself.

References

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