

Awraham Soetendorp, The Netherlands. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 4 on intergenerational responsibility and the Millennium Development Goals

To Avert the Day of Destruction



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Awraham Soetendorp is a child survivor of the Second World War. He has been a congregational Rabbi rebuilding Jewish life since 1968 through his Jewish Institute for Human Values. He has been intensely engaged in interfaith and humanitarian and ecological awareness building efforts and as a founding member of Green Cross International. In 1999, he founded the Hope for Children Foundation which fosters the Millennium Development Goal of universal education. He has introduced the Earth Charter into school curricula in the Netherlands. He is a member of the hundred leaders engaged in the dialogue of Islam and the West, initiated by the World Economic Forum. In 2005, he was co-recipient of the Peace Builder Award in Washington, D.C. He is an Earth Charter Commissioner.

Remarkably, the very last words of the biblical Book of Prophets state that the only way the complete destruction of Earth and all its inhabitants can be averted is when harmony is restored between the generations. “Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Eternal, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents – lest I come, and smite the land with destruction” (Malachi 4:4-6). These words, spoken by an anonymous prophet named Malachi, “my messenger,” about the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., resonate with great force in our age.

The Earth Charter is to a great extent a response to this challenge. From the Preamble: “Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world” (Preamble, paragraph five). From the Principles: “Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations” (Subprinciple 4.a); “Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth’s human and ecological communities” (Subprinciple 4.b). From the commitments: “Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nature of all family members” (Subprinciple 11.c);

“Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies” (Subprinciple 12.c); and, “Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development” (Subprinciple 14.a). The whole concept of sustainability derives from the notion that the hearts of parents and children have to turn towards each other. In the deep understanding of Native Americans, in all that we do, we should be aware of the effects on the seventh generation.

An ancient Jewish parable addresses these intergenerational responsibilities in simple terms. In the parable, an old man is planting a fruit tree. A young man passes by and remarks, “Foolish old man, you will never be able to reap the fruits of the tree.” The old man retorts, “Foolish young man, when I was born I did not come into a desert. My ancestors planted trees for me. And I do not want to leave a forlorn land without trees to your generation.” Is this age old truth self-evident at the beginning of the third millennium following a century which experienced indomitable progress and most cruel destruction?

What is desperately needed is the strengthening of compassion and hope. Compassion, in the fine definition of Martha Nussbaum, is to feel the painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune. Compassion is not hereditary, it is not transmitted by genes, but it can, and therefore, must be, taught. Schools must be caring institutions where the capacity of solidarity, of developing what Robert Lifton calls “the species selves” – reaching beyond nationality and race and embracing others – is being taught. To this end, the different spiritual traditions, certainly including the Abrahamic faiths, together with faith traditions from the East, can and must contribute. It is my conviction that the teaching, interpretation, and action based upon the Earth Charter will enhance the capacity for compassion. The holistic approach of integrating respect and care for the community of life, social and economic justice, democracy, non-violence, and peace is indispensable in this effort.

And what about hope? At the end of a workshop devoted to

water, in preparation for the large conference of the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona summer 2004, young people spoke about their experiences and their ambitions in a very moving, sincere way, shaming us the elders who had been much more cautious, blaming others rather than ourselves for not making necessary progress. The last speaker was Michael from California. He felt so privileged having the education, the means, and the time to engage in the protection of water resources, having been born in a place of luxury. However, he was afraid he would not be able to realize his greatest ambition, to become a grandfather, because of the man-made disasters which we would bring upon ourselves – “the day of destruction.” It was one of those rare moments when I realized fully why I had to be there. “Michael, when I was born in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam in war-torn Holland in 1943, my chances of ever becoming a grandfather were zero because of the man-made disaster of those days. But, I am a grandfather today because of the soft forces of compassion that moved my non-Jewish foster parents to give me a home and shelter. I believe that those soft forces will prevail, and that you, God willing, will have grandchildren who will drink living water.” This is my basis hope and it gives urgency to the involvement in the struggle for a just and peaceful society. But is it enough?

I recognize Michael’s generation’s fears and despair. We, the elders, have not planted the healthy fruit trees, at least not enough, and the threat of destruction is real. We can only together retrieve the moral resources needed to rebuild the inclusive world community of decency in which no one is degraded. To this end, the Earth Charter is a moral guide – a compass of conscience. However, it does not stand alone. There exists a necessary, all-empowering connectedness with the goals for the new millennium. How extraordinary! The Earth Charter was inaugurated and presented to Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands in the Peace Palace in June 2000, only months before the representatives of 189 countries signed the declaration of the Millennium Developments Goals. These were the result of powerful parallel processes, which ranged over decades. No one coordinated both these events. Perhaps such a coincidence is but the recognition of the cosmic order which exists but of which we are seldom aware. Taken together the Earth Charter and the Millennium Goals are in continuous conversation with each other, in question and response, beginning with both Preambles.

From the Earth Charter, “We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future....The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life” (Preamble, paragraph one and paragraph four).

From the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Developments Goals: “We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the object dehuman-

izing conditions of dehumanizing poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected....We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want...” (III.,11.).

The Millennium Development Goals call for the formation of a global partnership, and the political leadership of the world community responded with an unprecedented alliance of concern. The moral appeal to conscience and responsibility, expressed in unambiguous, interconnected principles and commitments, was translated by the governments of almost all nations in a detailed and realistic roadmap of action:

- to reduce the proportion of people living on less \$1 US a day from twenty-eight percent to fourteen percent;
- to ensure universal education;
- to eliminate gender disparity in schools;
- to reduce the rate of mortality of those under five years old by two-thirds;
- to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters;
- to halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other infectious diseases;
- to integrate the principle of sustainable development into country policies and reverse the loss of environmental resources;
- to provide safe drinking water to a billion people, who have not access to date, and basic sanitation to 1.5 billion people;
- to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers;
- to strive for open rule-based governance, more generous aid for reducing poverty and debt relief for developing countries.

Political leadership astounded the world community by agreeing, not only to these detailed, concrete steps to alleviate poverty; but, by attaching to these efforts a fixed timetable, they dared to choose a truly prophetic time path leading to 2015.

During the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, politicians repeatedly told the spiritual leaders who had also assembled, “Please keep pressing us to take measures that may contravene national self-interest but are necessary to safeguard the planet.” During the UN Millennium Summit, they at least made a start in putting the interest of the most impoverished citizens of the world community before the direct self-interests of the various governments.

The Earth Charter community of concerned citizens tries to assure that the audacious steps taken by the governments will be sustainable. The channeled energy to fortunately alleviate this desperate generation from what Don Helder Camera called “misery beyond poverty” should not endanger the survival of future generations. And, we can only achieve this intergenerational aim by changing attitudes, values, and patterns of consumption. The question is not whether I can afford a second car, but whether the world community can afford me having a second car. How essential the cooperation is between the value-orientated Earth Charter and the moral activism of the Millen-

Millennium Development Goals is shown throughout, but, in particular, in the statement in the Preamble of the Earth Charter that states, "We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more" (paragraph four). The ethical imperative is to redouble our efforts as one global community to meet the basic needs within the next decade, and at the same time to prepare ourselves for new ways of responsible living with each other in reverence for the diversity of life. As the Preamble says, a change of heart and mind is required.

Another conclusion of the Earth Charter that is of paramount importance in trying to realize the Millennium Development Goals is that "our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision..." (The Way Forward, paragraph two). Cultural diversity is not a threat to the cohesion in our societies. On the contrary, it is a blessing. Different cultures and spiritual traditions enrich and inspire the common effort towards justice and peace. Study of the Earth Charter itself would contribute greatly towards mutual understanding of the various worldviews and enhance cooperation. I suggest that the various spiritual traditions undertake the writing of a commentary from their belief systems and ways of life which will then be shared and studied. In this respect, the notion emanating from Buddhist tradition that we have to deal with the threat posed by inner pollution could be incorporated into the Earth Charter. The challenge is to take away the stumbling blocks of ignorance and mistrust and thus to allow the unimpeded flow of wisdom and experience emanating from the different cultural and religious traditions. Thank God, there are many ways leading to the truth.

And, there is more than a glimmer of hope. The experience of Israelis and Palestinians discussing the challenges posed by the Earth Charter together in workshops over the last few years shows how beneficial this intercultural, interreligious exchange is for the fostering of mutual trust.

Furthermore, the Earth Charter points out that an innovative and strengthened and strong partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance. Amongst the many ways to forge this partnership, I suggest the following: the extra contribution of a millennium share of 0.1% of one's income by every individual citizen in the countries of relative wealth during each year of this coming decade. Not only would such a voluntary taxation provide an estimated \$50 billion US annually, but the concentrated expression of willingness to support the Millennium Development Goals would help to convince the political leadership in the various states to raise the level of GNP towards the agreed 0.7%. Yes, every individual, family, and organization has a vital role to play. In the The Netherlands, we came very close to realizing this proposal in 1999. Trade unions and employers' organizations, both partners in the Millennium Labour Council (<http://www.mlc.org.za/origins2.asp>), agreed in principle to having 0.1% set aside during wage negotiations for financing

increasing efforts towards universal education as a millennium gift to the world. Unfortunately, at the last minute they did not dare to go beyond a recommendation. But, this occurred before the Millennium Declaration. I firmly believe it is doable. Trade unions and employers' organizations will work together towards this goal, when the urgency is felt, even more determinedly.

Jeffrey Sachs, Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary General on the Millennium Development Goals, is right when he calls upon us, now that we have committed ourselves to halving poverty by 2015, to end extreme poverty by 2025. Those dates may make us feel uncomfortable, but they are the benchmarks of a decent behavior, urging us to fulfill our minimal requirement. In the words of another prophet, Micha: "to do what is just, loving mercy."

The Earth Charter helps us to be continuously aware that there are not "them" and "us", that while we are working day and night to finally eradicate poverty for others, we are doing it also for ourselves, to be whole. "To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny" (Preamble, paragraph one). We truly form one body; when one part of the body aches, the whole body feels the pain. We can only restore the health of the planet community when we have cured all the inhabitants. The prophet Malachi realized that this state of universal health can only be achieved when the healthy relationship between the generations is being restored. It is the custom of Native Americans to hand the elders a feather and ask them to relate to the young generation what particular lesson they want them to hold to, all through their lives. In my own experience, I have come to realize how important it is also for the elders to hear and learn the ambitions and hopes of the young. Sharing experiences and ambitions helps to interlink, even stronger, to learn to be always inclusive, and to practice sustainable living. The Earth Charter and the Millennium Development Goals together interlink the lessons and the hopes of succeeding generations and help to internalize them.

At the start of this decade of responsibility, I share my own lesson, the experience of a baby seeking refuge. The man of the resistance, holding me in a suitcase with holes in it, knocked on the door. Ria and Bertus van der Kemp opened the door. In a split second, they had the choice to take care of this Jewish baby, with all the risks entailed, or to close the door. By opening the door widely they gave me life. More and more, I see myself, I see ourselves, holding the doorknob in our hands. The door is ajar. Do we open or close the door? Millions upon millions of children in desperate need are staring at us with frightened eyes. Do we close the door, or open it widely? ●