

Edmund Rice Education Beyond Borders

TRANSFORMATIONAL EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE AND LIBERATION

EREBB Congress Address

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My Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Edmund Rice tradition,

I begin with this prayer:

*Clear our heart O God that we may see you
Clear our heart O God that we may truly see ourselves
Clear our heart O God that we may know the sacredness of this moment
And in every moment seek you, serve you as the bearer of life and unity.
Clear our heart O God that we may see. Amen*

Welcome to the City of Joy! Your first impressions of Kolkata will not show you much joy. Instead what you notice is squalor, poverty, heat, crowded streets and chaotic transport, a lack of privacy and hygiene, noise and pollution levels that can be frightening. All your senses are assailed. The City of Joy resides beneath all of this, in the hidden slums and back alleys of this amazing, teeming jungle of life. One has to get inside the skin to find the joy deep within its patterns of life, where to survive means to discover one's relatedness to everything around. Kolkata invites us into another way of living life. My prayer for each of you as spiritual leaders in our Edmund Rice schools and colleges is that you give yourselves the chance to see beneath the scheme of things, to look with the inner eye.

If your eyes are open you will see the things worth seeing.¹

"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."²

There is a lovely little quotation that I came across years ago which attempts to speak about a deep truth. It goes:

**I used to be deaf.
I would see people stand up and go through strange gyrations.
They called it dancing.
To me it looked absurd --- Until
one day I heard the music.**

The lesson is that when you listen, you will hear music everywhere.³

In a very perceptive reflection, the English Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, writes that the twin foundations on which Western Culture was built were that of ancient Greece and ancient Israel. Both these were very

¹ Rumi

² Antoine de St. Xupery, *The Little Prince*

³ Rumi

different. The Greeks had a very visual culture and its greatest achievements were those dealing with seeing. Their art, architecture and glorification of the human body (through games and drama) were spectacles – performances that were seen. Plato imagined knowledge as a sort of vision underlying reality, seeing beneath the surface to the true form of things. And from it we get our dominant idea of knowledge as seeing: we speak of insight, hindsight, we adopt a perspective, we offer an observation, we shed light on a subject, and we say “I see” when we understand something.

Ancient Israel was different. It enjoined on its people the daily task of listening: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” “If today you listen to God’s voice, harden not your hearts.” The injunction is to ‘listen’ to my commandments. The word for ‘listen’ has a very deep significance we are told. It can be translated as ‘to hear’, ‘to listen’, ‘to heed’, ‘to pay attention’, ‘to respond’, to obey’ and ‘to understand’. Listening ceases to be a passive activity but demands involvement and participation.

In a moment of mystical insight, Jesus of Nazareth on one occasion said:

“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see, for I tell you that many prophets and Kings wanted to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear what you hear, and never heard it.”⁴

Jesus was saying that his followers belonged to a new and radically different consciousness, a new way of seeing and hearing. His very first words recorded in the Gospels are to a change of consciousness: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel.” (Mk. 1:15) You and I know that the word for repent, *metanoia*, was not to feel sorry for one’s sins – the God of the mystic’s experience is not overly concerned about sin – but to allow oneself to be changed, to put on a new attitude, a new mind-set. Change your way of thinking and believe the Good News. (You are inseparable from God)

“The human ego prefers anything, just about anything, to falling, or changing, or dying. The ego is that part of you that loves the status quo—even when it’s not working. It attaches to past and present and fears the future.”⁵

“Change doesn’t happen from the top down or the bottom up. It happens from the inside out,” as the Bhutanese say.

Conversion is not an exercise in orthodoxy. Conversion is the heart-wringing process of becoming new—always and regularly and with exhausting consciousness. When we give ourselves to the process of conversion, day after long, long day, we give ourselves to the eternal moment of birth, of being new again. Otherwise we shall surely shrivel, fixed in a state of mind, a state of heart, a phase of life too small for us to breathe, to think, to be. “Anything or anyone that does not bring you alive, is too small for you.”⁶

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME THAT I DID SOMETHING FOR THE FIRST TIME?

The mystics across the board, irrespective of religion, invite us to change our consciousness. Today, more than at any other time in our human story, we are faced with a dire choice: change our

⁴ Lk. 10:23, 24

⁵ Richard Rohr

⁶ David Whyte, *House of Belonging*

consciousness or perish! This putting on a new mind is not like putting on a new shirt, or a new pair of spectacles. This 'putting on' costs us. It often tears us apart and shakes us inside out. Rumi tells us, "If you fall in love with me, I will mess you up!" Falling in love with God turns one's world upside down. One cannot explain this. One can only experience it.

So Hafiz can write:

I have learned so much from God
That I can no longer call myself
A Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist
A Muslim, a Jew

The old categories no longer contain how reality is grasped. Once one is caught up in a new consciousness, life is forever changed.

The God of Mystery beckons us out of the caves of the soul to faith and trust and new beginnings. It's when we get trapped in the past—in its details, and its shame, and its narrow boxes and short leashes—that life stops for us. When life is defined for us by others, we limit our sense of ourselves. And so many of us live lives defined for us by others: our parents, our partners, our employers, our church leaders and our society.

Then we dismiss the God of Possibility from our lives. We refuse to become the more that is our destiny. We sit on the dung heap of our past and make it our present. We fail to believe that God is. That God is in us. That God is calling us out of the darkness into the light. That God is luring us from the future.

BIG PICTURE 'STUFF' IS THE ABILITY TO RECOGNISE GOD CALLING FROM THE FUTURE. WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO ENGAGE THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY IN AN EXERCISE LIKE THAT?

Two years ago, just before I finished in Rome, the five of us on the Congregation Leadership Team decided to spend Holy Week in Krakow and visit Auschwitz. We felt it would be a good way to reflect on the suffering in our world and plumb its mystery. "Auschwitz was a dark epiphany, providing us with a terrible vision of what life is like when all sense of the sacred is lost and the human being--whoever he or she may be--is no longer revered as an inviolable mystery."

In one sense Auschwitz proclaimed the absence of God, what life could be like when we no longer saw it as sacred. The awful thing about it was that Christian people gave birth to Auschwitz. What sort of understanding of God sanctions deeds like that? What warped interpretations of the Non-Violent One gave credence to such a deity? What is wrong with religious belief?

Some time back I saw a film, *PK*, the initials actually form a Hindi word which means "drunk" or "inebriated". It tells the story of an alien who lands on earth and how he gets on. Within a few hours of his landing he has the amulet he wears (which serves as the remote control to recall his space ship) stolen. The rest of the film deals with his attempts to get it back. Everywhere he goes he is told that only God can help him. The film then shows his attempts to win the favour of the numerous deities that make up the many religions of India. Lost and confused, he is befriended by a woman journalist who eventually helps him track down the amulet. In a television debate with a 'God Man', a guru, he says:

Which God do I trust? You say God is one. I say that is wrong. There are two Gods: One God who created us, and the other that you created. I don't know anything about the one who created us. But the one you created is exactly like you: small, a liar, corrupt, makes false promises, one who meets the rich quickly and causes the poor to wait in long queues. He gets happy when he is appreciated and frightens people over small things. I have a simple point: trust the God who created us. And strike out the fake God you created.

We know how to protect our God.

You will protect your God? You ... our planet is a small one; there are millions of bigger planets out there in space. And you are sitting in this small planet, in a small city, in a small room, talking about protecting God. The one who created all this? He doesn't need your protection. He can protect himself real good.

Today somebody tried to protect their God and my friend died (as reference to a terrorist attack by one religious group on another). Only this shoe is left. Stop protecting your gods, or else in this planet only shoes will be left, no humans.

Vincent Van Gogh once said, "To believe in God for me is to feel that there is a God, not a dead one, or a stuffed one, but a living one... when I have a terrible need of – shall I say the word – religion, then I go out and paint the stars."

"A new consciousness, a more expansive sense of awareness, is catching up on us. We are beginning to see and understand according to a changed logic. It is only a matter of time until evolution will compel us to act differently."⁷

If we are to understand emerging consciousness as a manifestation of the Spirit of God alive in the land, then never has an age seen revelation, consciousness, and wisdom working more clearly than in this one. The signs of new awareness of the human relationship to God are everywhere, in all nations, in all peoples. And this has been around for some time now.

In 1959, a hundred years after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, the University of Chicago brought together a number of leading evolutionary pioneers to commemorate the occasion. Perhaps one of the most famous of the invited speakers was Julian Huxley, a brilliant scientist, humanist and world-renowned intellectual. Huxley's talk was called "The Evolutionary Vision", and he delivered it with an almost religious passion. He suggested that religion, as we knew it was dying, that "supernaturally centred" faiths were destined to decline, to deselect themselves out of existence like non-adaptive species in a hostile environment. "Evolutionary [hu]man can no longer take refuge from [his] loneliness in the arms of a divinised father figure whom [he] himself created," Huxley claimed, "nor escape from the responsibility of making decisions by sheltering under the umbrella of Divine Authority, nor absolve himself from the hard task of meeting his present problems and planning his future by relying on the will of an omniscient, but unfortunately inscrutable, Providence." Huxley's words were strong, spoken with the conviction of one who had worked his whole life to free the human spirit from belief systems unsuited to the modern world. But before proclaiming the death of religion altogether, he added a notable line. "Finally," he concluded, "the evolutionary vision is enabling us to discern, however incompletely, the lineaments of the new religion thatwill arise to serve the needs of the coming era."⁸

⁷ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *God in the Midst of Change*

⁸ *Evolutionaries*, Carter Phipps p. 15

In 1893, at the World Conference of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda recited an ancient Vedic hymn:

As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which people take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.

Vivekananda ended his discourse hoping for a religion that would be able to extend beyond human self-interests and aggrandizement.

It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature.⁹

“**We need myths** that will help us to identify with all our fellow-beings, not simply with those who belong to our ethnic, national or ideological tribe. **We need myths** that help us to realize the importance of compassion, which is not always regarded as sufficiently productive or efficient in our pragmatic, rational world. **We need myths** that help us to create a spiritual attitude, to see beyond our immediate requirements, and enable us to experience a transcendent value that challenges our solipsistic selfishness. **We need myths** that help us to venerate the earth as sacred once again, instead of merely using it as a 'resource.' This is crucial, because unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that is able to keep abreast of our technological genius, we will not save our planet.”

LOOK INSTEAD AT THE MYTHS THAT WE HAVE CREATED FOR OURSELVES AND FOR OUR INSTITUTIONS: NEED FOR EFFICIENCY, RESULTS, DISCIPLINE, AND ORDER, SO THAT WE MIGHT BE VALUED. WHEN WE EVALUATE OUR INSTITUTIONS, WHAT CRITERIA DO WE USE?

Spiritual leadership is transformational. It changes lives and puts meaning into people and places. Spiritual leaders realize that the greatest enemy lies within, that in order to re-vision the future they need to overcome their fears, their prejudices and their pettiness. Listen to the story from Exodus, when in Chapter 4 immediately after receiving the commission from Yahweh to “set my people free”, Moses is almost killed by Yahweh in the middle of the night. Or listen to the passage in Genesis, when Jacob wrestles with the Angel on the eve of the most momentous meeting of his life. It is a puzzling story, a story about the nature of blessings and the nature of enemies. How tempting to let the enemy go and flee, to put the struggle behind you as quickly as possible and get on with your life. Life might be easier then but far less genuine. Perhaps the wisdom lies in engaging the life we have been given as fully and courageously as possible and not letting go until we find the unknown blessing that is in everything.

We want to be transformative leaders. Do we give ourselves the time and space to face the enemy within? Do we have wisdom people to journey with us? Do we figure into our annual schedule some structure that will allow this to happen? This is a conscious journey. If we do not plan for it, it will not happen.

In this time of mystery, and of seeking to know something of God’s revelation to us, one of the most

⁹ Swami Vivekananda, *World Conference of Religions, Chicago, 1893*

critical things we can do as leaders is to go into the cave of darkness, knowing that it is a rich place of wisdom. Remember, life starts in darkness, a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, Jesus in the tomb, it all starts in darkness. Think about the spiritual leaders whose lives were changed in caves, in silence, in darkness, with the smell of the earth surrounding them. We know that Buddha meditated regularly in caves. In Bhutan there is the tradition of the great spiritual masters praying in deep caves. We know that Mohammad prayed in a small cave outside of Mecca for days at a time. Jesus was born in a cave and he sought out isolated places. So my first encouragement is not to rush, but to spend time in contemplative reflection.

Mark the time you will take for contemplation as the work of leadership. Realize that the deepest truths always take time to reach us, so our job is to wait on them. We have to pay attention to what is moving within us and within the institution. As Pema Chodron says, “Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know.” So staying with the questions we have, and the issues we are facing until we’ve been with them long enough so they release something of their power, and their wisdom takes a lot of quiet.

We have discovered that when our leaders do not confront their fears openly and honestly, our institutions go over to the dark side. “When our primitive fears are in charge, love, humility, compassion, forgiveness and the vision of a beloved community do not stand a chance”, says Palmer Parker.

Leadership challenges people to pay attention to the inner call from deep within, the journey from the false self to the true self. Leadership encourages us all to dismantle all the old masks and patterns and discover a more authentic self. There is a self within each of us aching to be born. Can we all disturb our inner universe, that behavioural script we have written for ourselves, in quest of the undiscovered being who clamours from within? That was the journey Jesus was on, and the one he wanted us to share: the journey into God is the journey into the depths of one’s being. And it is always disturbing. “When order crumbles, Mystery rises.”¹⁰

“In the process of transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviours motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God; from selfishness and self-absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self; from the ego’s desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to an ability to give ourselves over to the will of God which is often the foolishness of this world. This kind of change is not something we can produce or manufacture for ourselves but it is what we most need. It is what those around us most need.”¹¹

The central question is,
Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God,
people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence,
to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty,
to touch God’s incarnate Word
and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?¹²

Dalai Lama: It is clear that something is seriously lacking in the way we humans are going about things. But what is it that we lack? The fundamental problem, I believe, is that at every level we are giving too much attention to the external, material aspects of life while neglecting moral ethics and inner values.

¹⁰ John Shea, *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography*

¹¹ Ruth Hayley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Leadership*

¹² Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*

By inner values I mean the qualities that we all appreciate in others, and toward which we all have a natural instinct, bequeathed by our biological nature as animals that survive and thrive only in an environment of concern, affection, and warm-heartedness—or in a single word, compassion. The essence of compassion is a desire to alleviate the suffering of others and to promote their well-being.

Of course, all the world's major religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, can and do promote inner values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I believe the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics that is beyond religion.

I look forward to a day when children, as a result of integrating the principles of nonviolence and peaceful conflict resolution at school, will be more aware of their feelings and emotions and feel a greater sense of responsibility both toward themselves and toward the wider world.

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Br Philip Pinto cfc

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