

“Education for a Just, Compassionate and Sustainable World”

Lecture in the Sophia Symposium:
Education with a Social Dimension: the Challenges of Globalization
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Before all else I wish to acknowledge the people of Japan and express solidarity with you in the experiences you have endured since March this year with the triple calamity of earthquake, tsunami and the impact of the radiation leaks at the Fukushima power plant.

This talk is about justice, compassion and sustainability, and how education can enable these for the good of our world. Our discussion in this Symposium treats especially, but not exclusively, university education. As I understand it, a university has two main tasks: the formation of its students, and the shaping of society. The two tasks are deeply interconnected, one with the other.

The university has a social role. Many students long for a good education in order to better their societies. Society itself has a strong influence on all of us, including on educators. Governments, companies and social attitudes can all bring pressure, whether through restraints or incentives, on the type of education a university can offer: on the courses and research that is fashionable or fundable, on the employment available to graduates from different faculties, on who has access to the privilege of education.

Despite such constraints, brave and conscientious educators lead students to love our world, to assume responsibility for it, and to acquire tools in order to serve it. Students respond to this encouragement. Education is growth, process and development. Education, at least as I am describing and advocating it, is the deeply human experience of growing in wisdom and in capacity both to be happy and to serve others, to live justly and with compassion. Education changes an empty mind to an open mind. Education is about the deeply human.

A summary of this talk

First, I will speak of the challenges in our global society today, especially in Asia Pacific, and will highlight three current focal points: first, the current global financial crisis; second, the environmental and climate change challenges; and third, the violence of forced migration, especially for those most vulnerable.

Second, I will speak of four ancient pillars of social teaching: Human Dignity, the Common Good, Solidarity, and Subsidiarity. In regard to compassion, I will speak of the twelve steps to a compassionate life outlined in the recent work of Karen Armstrong.

Then I will talk about our need for vision, values and depth in regard to these social questions, and the importance of education for justice and compassion, and about sources of wisdom. If justice and compassion are assured, we can be confident that our world can be sustainable. How can justice and compassion take root in our minds and hearts?

Next, what shape can this education take? How do we learn justice and compassion? What is our pedagogical method? During this talk I will refer to several pedagogical approaches that can help develop a social conscience among our students. These are approaches to Ignatian pedagogy. Each requires engagement, dialogue and experiences that affect us in mind and heart; a pedagogy of the 'head, the heart and the hands'. This education implies deep human formation, strong enough to resist the pressures of society. To exemplify this I will draw on a study undertaken by the Jesuits in Asia Pacific, trying to build a framework for our own education.

Our world today – Asia Pacific today

It is hard to think of a time when compassionate voices are more needed. A number of ongoing events today can be identified as 'crises'. The world is in deep global financial crisis. We live in a planet in peril. Our world is quite polarised. Imbalances of power, wealth and resources, provoke rage, alienation and apathy which are sometimes expressed in violent actions that threaten everyone. Wars rage that no one is able either to end or to win. UNESCO's 2011 report tells us that armed conflict prevents 25 million children from receiving education, and that 6 days of the current expenditure in armed conflicts could bring education to all the children in the world who are deprived of it. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is present throughout Asia Pacific (in Myanmar, TB, malaria and AIDS are the three big killers). Asia offers major hubs for forced and exploitative labour migration on massive scales, including the trafficking in human persons, notably women and children. The poor are and will be increasingly at risk of natural calamities. In March this year Japan experienced its horrendous triple calamity. Over 12,000 tremors have followed. In 2008 Cyclone Nargis took 146,000 victims in Myanmar, and the Szechwan earthquake in the same year took 87,000 victims. Frequent mudslides in Indonesia and Philippines following typhoons or earthquakes each time affect thousands of people. Indeed in many countries people daily experience disasters – on garbage heaps, in inner cities, or in unprotected coastal areas. About 20 percent of the world's undernourished people (or more than a third of the global total if China and India are excluded) - 166 million - live in countries in protracted crises.

One friend in Myanmar claims that the people are so resilient because in their lives they are used to multiple disasters. In the Pacific Ocean, small nations are at risk of disappearing, thanks to the combined effects of climate change and the global economy. Suffering and want are not confined to some distant part of our world. Environmental calamity is a real possibility here in Asia Pacific.

Humankind is increasingly interdependent and interconnected. Societies that could formerly isolate themselves through restrictive migration laws, tight trade controls, language limitations can no longer resist the tsunami of contacts that sweep across them because of trade, migration and media. The world is experiencing immense change.

Frontiers collapse or move. Whole communities and countries are changing because of globalization and the communications revolution driving it. Among the challenges are the financial crises, environmental changes, and the massive movement of people. These overlapping challenges demand new responses.

Financial crisis

Let us talk of the global financial crisis. The 99% and “Occupy” movements in Europe and North America (as well as the ‘Arab Spring’), indicate that a large number of people around the world believe we are headed in the wrong direction. There is a powerful sense of whole societies paying for the errors and irresponsibility of bankers; of messages not getting through; of impatience with a return to ‘business as usual’ with soaring bonuses and little visible change in banking practices. The ‘Euro crisis’ centered on Greece, and already eating into Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Spain is munching now at the walls of the Euro zone. Angela Merkel said that Europe has not faced a crisis as deep as this since the Second World War. This crisis in the financial world affects everyone. Neither regulation alone, or free markets, or our political processes seem able to provide the answers that are needed now. It calls for a new economic paradigm. There is anger at the status quo, and resentment at a perceived culture of greed, fraud and mismanagement. Concentrations of wealth and power, unfairness in political processes, the loss of opportunity — especially for the next generation — and the alarming rise of poverty in the world’s richest nations are all fundamental concerns. Ethical values must take centre stage in the financial world to restore honesty, integrity and fairness. Unless justice prevails, the rot at the heart of the financial system will continue to spread.

As David Suzuki says, “In a finite world, endless growth is impossible”. What has shaped our education, the subjects taught, activities lead, priorities chosen, planning undertaken so much that reality is left out? Why too is ethics so widely excluded from the study and practice of economics? Is economics at the service of people, to make society better? Or are people expected to be at the service of economics?

Climate and environmental crisis

The ongoing ‘climate change’ crisis is not unrelated to the economic crisis. The Earth we have been given is a limited planet. Its finite resources cannot provide for the type of growth and consumption pursued by privileged sectors. Recently earth’s population exceeded seven billion, yet the number is not the issue, but rather how we live. As Mahatma Gandhi said “there are more than enough resources for our needs, but not for our greed.” Inevitably, the richest sectors will have to curb their demand for better life standard if we want everybody to gradually live better. Our education and our intelligence should focus not so much in how many we are, but in how we use and exploit creation. The best way to begin to do this is to give thanks for what we have, to rejoice in creation and in nature, to appreciate our forests, our rivers and seas, but also our cities and the ingenuity of what can be built by human hands.

These crises urge on us an alternative vision that begins with gratitude and goes beyond narrow national self-interest to a more collaborative international community based on principles of justice, and humility in the face of the planet’s natural limits.

These crises help us to learn the grammar of morality. Good and bad are objective, not subjective; real, not endlessly pliable; relevant to public life, not restricted to the private. Above all a sense of good and bad is necessary. For many, learning morality is like learning a new language.

Migration

The third area which I wish to address is migration. In this area we are referring to the dramatic movements of people, especially of Asian people, away from their homes and often away from their countries, in search of employment. We refer also to those persons displaced by conflicts or environmental events who become refugees, stateless persons, or internally displaced persons. We are talking about the children, women and men who are trafficked. As Antonio Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has put it so succinctly, “The 21st century will be characterised by the mass movement of people being pushed and pulled within and beyond their borders by conflict, calamity or opportunities.”

But rather than describe the present phenomenon of migration in detail, I will assume you are familiar with it and speak of the four classic pillars of social teaching and relate them with this question.

1. All human persons are equal in dignity and rights.

Regardless of their legal status or geographic location, anyone forced to move has a claim on our hospitality. The more vulnerable the person, the greater the moral claim on our care. Freedom of movement arises from being a person, i.e. from self-awareness and self-determination. It may only be restricted in order to safeguard the common good.

2. The common good.

Every person has the right to participate in the common good. Every person and human group has the right to share in the benefits of life in society, and to access the goods of the earth in order to meet their needs and achieve their potential. The dignity of persons comes before the interests of nations states. People must never be treated as means. The earth is the common heritage of the whole human family. Migrants have a duty to contribute to the common good, locally and globally. Thus they must be able to participate in economic, social, cultural and political life of country where they live.

3. Solidarity.

Those individuals, communities, nations and institutions with the greatest capacity to assist the displaced have the greatest responsibility to do so. The principle or virtue of Solidarity enables us to imagine ourselves in the place of those fleeing violence, climate degradation, or lack of opportunities for decent life. Solidarity calls us to change and transform whatever forces people to migrate against their will.

4. Subsidiarity

In such a context, this principle implies that those people and groups least able to protect their own dignity and rights have the strongest claim on our assistance. For example, when

a nation is unwilling or unable to protect the dignity and rights of people within its borders, the international community has a duty to respond.

Twelve steps to a Compassionate Life:

In this explanation I draw from the recent work of Karen Armstrong¹. She explains her project and her purpose in writing this book. “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves... Born of deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.” In the time we have available, I can do no more than mention the steps listed by Karen Armstrong without comment. One can readily recognize that to pursue each of these steps in depth will surely aid us to a just and peaceful world.

1. Learn about Compassion
2. Look at your own world
3. Compassion for yourself
4. Empathy
5. Mindfulness
6. Action
7. How little we know
8. How should we speak to one another?
9. Concern for everybody
10. Knowledge
11. Recognition
12. Love your enemies

To grow in compassion means to accompany and be in solidarity with the poor, the hungry, to comfort the sorrowful, to oppose injustice. Crucially it requires that we understand ourselves and our world, particularly what is wrong in ourselves and the world around us.

Education for a Just and Compassionate World

Now I wish to sketch out yet another yet complementary pedagogy of learning about social justice through engagement.² Education through engagement in the reality is a ‘social’ way of learning that requires knowledge and familiarity with wisdom sources, reason, and experience. Experience here means entering into the lives of the victims of injustice, accompanying them. This approach prevents us from rushing to action without deep attention to the experience of those affected. It encourages time given to analysis and reflection. This reflection in turn leads to new learning, and potentially to new action.

¹ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, The Bodley Head, London, 2011

² This section sketches an approach called the ‘Pastoral Cycle’ which built on the ‘see, judge, act’ approach of Josef Cardijn. See *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, Wijzen, F., Henriot, P., & Mejjia, R., (eds), Orbis, New York, 2005. This method is well explained by Ms Sandie Cornish on her very useful website, www.social-spirituality.net, from which I have drawn ideas for this presentation.

There are four questions to ask in this process of education for justice and compassion:

1. What is happening? (Experience) This cycle commences with human experience. First we have to describe what is really happening to people in the situation we enter, and for this we must listen to the ones who are most directly affected.
2. Why is it happening? (Analysis) The next step is to investigate in a systematic way: What are the causes of this situation, historical, political, economic, social or cultural, and even religious? What are the consequences? How are all these factors linked? Who are the main actors? Who is responsible, who is making decisions, who is affected?
3. What does it mean? (Reflection) In the light of wisdom teachings, (eg of philosophy, theology, sacred scriptures, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) we ask is human dignity being upheld or denied? Are human rights respected? How do my religious traditions speak to this situation? How are the social principles relevant? Can historical experiences and events help us to understand this situation better?
4. How shall we respond? (Response) Drawing on many sources of advice and knowledge and tradition, we ask: What can I do? What can communities do? Does our action include the people most affected? Are they empowered to advocate in their own cause?

It is important not to be afraid to act. Compassion compels us to respond. Compassion gives a compass for our actions. We can start with whatever information is available to us. Even a modest response based on what we do already know helps us avoid being paralyzed by the feeling that we need more certainty. Our response can always deepen if we continue to evaluate our actions and critically examine our methods, gather more knowledge, analyze further and continue to reflect upon it. We can ask ourselves whether our action led to some change in the situation, in ourselves, or in our understanding of the situation. We can ask what is happening now.

The Formation of a “Person for Others”

During the last few years, we have been examining the ‘formation’ of our own Jesuits in Asia Pacific, attempting to outline our goals and purpose. I would like to share something of our process and plans, since I feel they complement the educational steps spelled out above.³ Basically we see formation as deep human education, a profound personal transformation. How does this transformation take place? Often, even usually, it occurs through experiences of vulnerability. In other words compassion is again a key: to endure something with another person, to allow the pain of other people to get inside us will dispose us to change, to being transformed. If the experience is deep, it is difficult to return to the isolated self again. But it is important that this formation is an invitation; it cannot be forced. It means being open to the outsider, to the poor and to those who suffer.

³ The document referred to here, *Forming a Contemplative in Action: A Profile of a Formed Jesuit for Asia Pacific*, is available at the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific website: <http://sjapc.net/what-we-do/forming-contemplative-action-profile-formed-jesuit-asia-pacific>.

Six Interrelated Dynamics of Personal Formation

In deep human and personal formation, there are a number of interrelated dynamics. In exploring the education of our own brother Jesuits for their demanding role, we have identified the following important attributes or characteristics of a well-rounded, socially aware person. I share them to give an insight on the personal qualities that will surely help a person become ready to contribute to peace and justice in our world.

Interiority

Psychosexual and affective maturity

Conversation

Critical thinking

Universal perspective

Discerned action

Education of the ‘Head, Heart and Hands’

The role of education in facing today’s challenges and opportunities is to lead students to love the world, to assume responsibility for it, and to acquire tools in order to renew it. Education changes an empty mind to an open mind, ready to engage in reality. Education is about the deeply human.

The education of which I am speaking is a formation for decision and for action. It has been described by a Jesuit educator, Fr Ross Jones SJ, now Rector of St Ignatius College in Sydney, as “education of the head, the heart and the hands”. He says:

Of course, education’s core business is the mind: education in competence and critical thinking. But in the pedagogy I have proposed, reflection is central. That means allowing meaning to surface from human experience. That makes the difference. ... I like to think we concern ourselves with uncovering the curriculum. That is, pausing and digging deeper. Reflection is where meaning is allowed to surface from human experience. That makes the difference. That kind of critical thinking should often have you testing the strength of public opinion – especially when it is inaccurate or deliberately deceitful...

Second, this is an education of the heart. We want our students first of all to know where is their heart, to become *large-hearted, whole-hearted*, and to *speak from the heart* in truth and with integrity; to own that their *heart’s desire* is to love and serve others, to discover happiness in supporting our brothers and sisters – especially those who are the least, the lost or the last.

Third, education of the hands... our education prizes *generous hands* that put gifts and talents at the service of others; *strong hands* that will take up the fight to uphold justice when delayed or denied; *compassionate hands* that will welcome and tend those who, in their need, have the greatest claim on us.

This pedagogy involves a universal vision that looks both to those who are near and those beyond our shores and seeks solidarity with others to build worldwide community – and networks of local communities of justice and compassion.

Conclusion

Through dialogue our minds and hearts can be touched. Compassion gives a compass. The education of which I have spoken is about the deeply human. To become a just and compassionate person is a lifelong project; hence the stress on sustainability. The twelve steps, Karen Armstrong would tell us, must be worked at continuously through life: learning more about compassion, surveying our world anew, struggling with discouragement. Even loving those close to us can sometimes be an effort! Yet even in our conflicted world we do see people who have achieved heroic levels of empathy, forgiveness and concern for the other. Constant practice makes perfect. The truly compassionate person touches a chord that resonates deeply with others. Compassionate persons seem to offer a haven in a violent and sometimes angry world.

The University has two main challenges: to form its students, and to help shape society. Society places great restraints on the university. These restraints must be discerned and where necessary, resisted for the good of the students, our society and our future. Education must always be relevant to people's lives and real situations problems. To understand the lives of others, compassion is essential.

Education is growth, process and development. The role of education in facing today's challenges and opportunities is to lead students to love the world, to form them to assume responsibility for it, and to acquire tools in order to renew it, to bring justice and compassion. This comes about through engagement, through dialogue and through touching minds and hearts. Education is about the deeply human.