

NEIGHBORHOOD: A MORAL, NOT GEOGRAPHIC, PLACE

by Jonathan Granoff

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The living sacred biosphere, of which the human community is but a part, is threatened by the ways in which we humans treat each other and the world's living systems. As caretakers, we must affirm in every manner possible our underlying interconnectedness as one magnificent and varied human family, living in different conditions but sharing a commitment to core values all humanity can uphold. The Commission on Global Governance has stated:

We need a set of common values around which we can unite people, irrespective of their cultural, political, religious or philosophical backgrounds. . . . Foremost these values must include the duty of care for one's neighbor. In a neighborhood, all are neighbors. In our global neighborhood, therefore, our duty of care is owed to all who share the planet. This duty, of course, is more compelling the more a neighbor needs care.

Neighborhood is not a geographic but a moral definition. It is a model consistent with the growing recognition of interdependencies, whether economic or environmental. But this is a relatively new model in government and law. In law, for example, there are three models of relationships. Nations make agreements, such as treaties, as sovereign entities always reserving the right of withdrawal for their supreme national interest. Marketplace entities, corporations or individuals, make

arm's-length agreements, such as contracts, defining rights and responsibilities held together by judicial enforcement. The family is premised on the legal union of people: families live as one where each feels the joys and sorrows of the other as their own. Each parent is the caretaker of the children, and husbands and wives share life in unity. In a family, the supreme interest of self is the well-being of all.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines a set of family values appropriate to the vision of the Earth the astronauts' photos reveal — one living organism of interconnected lives. The Declaration begins by emphasizing that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world." Today, family values of ethnic, racial, religious, or nationalistic prejudice, or a concern for "my family only," are far too narrow to be called fully human. Yet the family values upon which the Declaration of Human Rights is founded are often perverted in the world of affairs between nations.

In the US we spend over \$1,000 per person annually for security through the use and threat of violence, and less than \$7 per person for the cooperative security regime of the UN. A brief observation of almost any period of human history is replete with horrors — adequate justification to believe the world is an unredeemable place. In the last fifty years alone there have been over 200 wars with more than 25 million killed. Yes, there is evidence that life is suffering, and there are reasons to rely primarily on the threat and use of violence for security.

But this rationale is incomplete; it is flawed in its denial of our humanity and the numerous examples of self-

government and justice arising from our capacities of enlightened self-interest, reason, and compassion. Though we have the capacity to behave with ignorance, we are not condemned to do so. Every major religion has foundations of ethical brilliance based on the Golden Rule; numerous countries allow us to live with unprecedented liberty and wealth because of social cooperation. The UN Charter is a collective proclamation of humanity's commitment to rise above ignorance and to move from the law of power to the power of law.

In his introduction to *Defining Purpose: The UN and the Health of Nations*, *The Final Report of the US Commission on Improving the Effectiveness of the United Nations* (Sept. 1993), US Congressman James Leach stated:

In assessing the UN today, policymakers must apply perspective by reference to philosophic possibilities as well as historical experience. Whether peoples and nation-states can ever come to have confidence in the UN and the international system it has come to signify depends in the final measure on assessments, not only of power relations, but also of human nature.

Only an optimistic assessment of human nature makes the prospect of greater world law and order imaginable. For philosophers like Hobbes, self-centered man cannot put himself in the shoes of others; he cannot find his way out of the jungle where life is nasty, brutish and short, because he has no capacity for mutual accommodation. For Marx, malleable man, the tool of determinist forces, needs to be controlled; he could never take responsibility for forging his own destiny. For Locke and his philosophical stepson, Jefferson, man's fate can be viewed more optimistically. Individuals are not only presumed to be born with rights no legitimate state can take away, but with a rational nature capable of developing institutional arrangements to protect and preserve those rights.

For the world to cope with old problems of war and new problems of arms control and environmental poisoning, the optimist assumption must hold: that just as man's propensity to maximize self-interest makes the establishment of civil society a survivalist

imperative, so man's capacity for compromise, for reasoned give and take, makes a civilized community possible. Never in the course of human events has it been more important for individuals in public life to appeal to the highest rather than the lowest instincts of the body politic. The stakes are too high.



In all of the natural creation, we can observe the intricate interplay of life's delicate balance in harmonious patterns which stun the mind in their complexity and beauty. Should not the human community recognize its own exalted potential? Is not this realization a matter of survival in this age? Banding together with solid ties of family and community, humans throughout history have demonstrated cooperative and organizational abilities and capacities for caring. Upon reflection, we can each discover that the concerns we feel for others are not driven by self-interest or external authority; they arise from the very core of our being. These capacities of compassion and justice cannot be overlooked or diminished. When we determinedly create institutional arrangements and legal order based on these values, humanity flourishes.

I believe that our future is largely determined by the view of the human condition we choose. That is one reason the UN is so important: it is founded on the ideals that make us truly human. It is our own lack of confidence in the power of these ideals that holds us back. Plato said, "We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy is when [adults] are afraid of the light."

For most of the first 50 years of the UN, the cold war produced a cycle of fear in which threats required

armaments, armaments bred fear, and fear led to further armaments. We have before us an opportunity for civil society to drive a new dynamic process in which confidence-building, trust, global responsibility, and sustainable social development can redefine security and lead to real disarmament, which will reinforce the dynamics of trust and development. Governments or market forces alone cannot drive this process; it is the responsibility of NGOs and civil society to make this happen.

We have the capacity to analyze our collective challenge using perennial values. It is love that can lead us to strategies from deep within our hearts to create institutional structures for peace where the preciousness of life will be respected from the microbiological realm into the infinite firmaments. Let the hearts of each of us be the beginning of such a place of love, peace and forgiveness. Let each of us challenge ourselves, our political bodies, our churches, temples, mosques, and indeed the UN and our member states, with the seriousness of our commitment. The short span of years we each have can be filled either with an awareness of the exaltedness contained in our full humanity, or with an apathy that accepts reliance on the threat and use of violence. Our alternatives could not be clearer.

Look at the power released through the forgiveness of Nelson Mandela. Why should we doubt the power of conscience, of love? Is it because we fear that we are actually the expressions of the Creator's divine brilliance, and that if we allow room for accepting such majesty, our responsibilities to one another will increase? Our duties to care and be expressions of compassion will indeed increase — and all those who have willingly accepted such responsibility, in every culture and time, have reported to humanity that such a life is filled with meaning and peace. Let us not shrink from the beauty that our hearts can express, a beauty that naturally liberates in untold ways, spiritual and political. ❖