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Dignity for All: Building a Culture of Human Rights

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The SGI Quarterly aims to highlight initiatives and perspectives on peace, education and culture and to provide information about the SGI’s activities around the world. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the SGI. The editorial team (see inside back cover) welcomes ideas and comments from readers.
Dignity for All: Building a Culture of Human Rights

“I am convinced that the development of a culture of human rights throughout the world is one of the most important contributions that can be made to future generations. The foundation for this culture is enshrined in the principles of the Universal Declaration. A culture of human rights would result in a profound change in how individuals, communities, states and the international community view relationships in all matters. Such a culture would make human rights as much a part of the lives of individuals as are language, customs, the arts, faith and ties to place. In this culture, human rights would not be seen as the job of ‘someone else,’ but the obligation and duty of all.”

(José Ayala Lasso, the first United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

What is a human being? This is not just an abstract philosophical musing, but a practical question about how far our species has to go before our common humanity is fully realized. We are still far more easily pulled toward a consciousness of our differences than to an awareness of our commonalities—a fundamental reason why discrimination, exploitation, bigotry and war hold such sway in our world today. From the perspective of Buddhism, our ability to perceive the inherent dignity of our own lives opens our hearts and our eyes to the dignity of the lives of all people. This awareness diminishes all
经济、社会或文化障碍。它可以打开合作、尊重、和平和社区繁荣的道路——创建人权文化。世界愿景中，所有人的尊严都得到了保护和尊重，这推动了历史上一些最伟大的先驱，他们倡导自己的和其他人的进步，常常在“人的权利”或“平等权利”或“所有人的人权”的旗帜下。《人权宣言》是1948年12月10日采用的，它是实现这一愿景的一个里程碑。宣言的原则为构建全球人权文化奠定了基础并使之成为现实。本刊第37期将探讨世界各地的人们在不同情况下是如何做到这一点的。

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Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his activism against South Africa’s apartheid system of racial segregation. After the country’s first democratic election in 1994, he was asked by President Nelson Mandela to chair South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a process of national healing during which the country squarely confronted the human rights abuses that had been perpetrated under apartheid.

Archbishop Tutu is also well known for popularizing beyond South Africa’s borders the concept of ubuntu, a word which might be said to describe the underlying fabric of a culture of human rights, and which he has explained as follows: “Ubuntu says a person is a person through other persons. I cannot be a human being in isolation. I need other human beings in order for me to become a human being. And it says you and I need one another. For we are created for interdependence. We are created for togetherness. We are created, ultimately, for being family. And this is going to be the only way, ultimately, that we will survive in this world.”

**SGI Quarterly**: Why do we need a culture of human rights?

**Desmond Tutu**: A culture of human rights is as essential as the rule of law in society. Without respect for the rule of law, chaos ensues; but where the rule of law obtains everyone knows that there are parameters, boundaries, standards that apply equally for everyone—for instance, that an accused person is assumed to be innocent until proven guilty. It sets standards and holds up ideals to be aimed at. So also a human rights culture sets standards and ideals to be aspired after. It is because, for instance, we believe that all people are equal that sexism is now so heavily discredited.
or why racism is totally unacceptable. **SGIQ:** How are the concept and practice of ubuntu and that of a culture of human rights similar or different?

**DT:** Ubuntu is culturally determined, whereas human rights apply universally. Both set high store by persons though ubuntu stresses our communal aspect.

**SGIQ:** Given the pervasive culture of violence in the world today, the idea of a culture of human rights might seem to be simply an unrealistic ideal.

**DT:** No. That is precisely when it is most needed for people to aim at the ideal. But people persisted and, well, as they say, the rest is history! No, it is not an unrealistic dream. It is so crucial, for instance, to speak about the right to life of everyone until the opposite is universally unacceptable.

**SGIQ:** How would you define a champion of human rights?

**DT:** A human rights champion is someone with an unquenchable zeal to see right and justice prevail, who accords opponents the right to their point of view and hopes to persuade them by reasoning and debate to change their view. My father used to say, “Improve your argument; don’t raise your voice!” The methods such a champion uses must be consistent with what she is promoting.

**SGIQ:** What can ordinary people do in order to help make a culture of human rights a reality?

**DT:** There are no ordinary people—every one of us is a very special person because we are each created in the image of God and so of infinite worth. Each one of us should stand up for human rights. It is ultimately only when human rights prevail that the vulnerable will be safe. Rights have, on their obverse side, responsibilities and obligations. My right to my own opinion involves my being tolerant of the different views of others. Someone said, “My right to stretch my arm ends where your nose begins.”

**SGIQ:** You have emphasized the importance of restorative justice. What about people who can’t let go of the need for retribution? You can’t force people to forgive.

**DT:** Yes, you cannot force anyone to forgive because forgiveness is not cheap. It is not just facile. It is costly, but restorative justice ultimately is better than retributive justice because it seeks to heal a breach whereas retributive justice concentrates on being punitive and can set off a horrendous cycle of revenge.

**SGIQ:** How important or realistic is dialogue to the process of establishing a culture of human rights, especially in situations of seemingly intractable conflict?

**DT:** Human rights are best promoted through persuasion and discussion where enemy meets adversary and they begin to realize they share a common humanity.

**SGIQ:** In the struggle against apartheid, how did you maintain hope in the face of such daunting circumstances? How can people regain and maintain a sense of hope in the face of complex global problems today?

**DT:** I believed then as I still do that this is God’s world and that God is in charge; that this is a moral universe and that ultimately goodness, right and justice will prevail over their ghastly counterparts. And I knew too that many were praying with fervent prayers, and we owe a great deal to all those who were part of the international antiapartheid movement.

Yes, it is not easy, but they should hang on to the belief that right will eventually triumph.

**SGIQ:** As an individual who has long been on the forefront of the struggle for human rights, what is your message to the youth of a new generation confronting their own struggles to build a world in which the dignity of all is recognized and respected?

**DT:** I admire young people. They are amazing in their idealism believing that we can have a world without war, without poverty and disease. I say to them, “Dream your dreams of a better world, dream the dream of God!"
Ishmael Beah was 13 when he was forced to become a soldier in Sierra Leone’s civil war, which had already claimed the lives of his immediate family. In A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier, he describes this experience and the two years he spent fighting in that war before entering a rehabilitation camp for former child soldiers and going to live in the United States with Laura Simms, who became his mother. His book has become an international bestseller. The article below is an edited excerpt from an address he gave on May 12, 2008, at the SGI-USA New York Culture Center, as part of SGI-USA’s “Culture of Peace Distinguished Speaker Series.”

I didn’t write this book just to explain what had happened to me. This book came out of frustration. And it speaks to the idea of promoting respect for all human rights.

When Sierra Leone began appearing on the news, the way it was spoken about was as if it had always had a civil war. We became known to the international community because of the war—Sierra Leone equals civil war and amputation, madness and nothing more. People could not see the Sierra Leone that existed before the war: the place where I grew up, where I went to school, learned Shakespeare, where I listened to American hip-hop; a place with a very strong community—there was storytelling in the evening where you sat around and adults told stories to young people. All of these things disintegrated because of the war.

When this country was spoken about, that context wasn’t there. And when people don’t see that context, it brings about a sense of hopelessness—that’s no presence of humanity within the telling of the story.

Because of the way stories are told about other places, there’s an absolute need for us to expose ourselves to the world, to learn about other places and other people. When we do so, we see those people are as human as we are—they have the same human tendencies, desires, needs and wants. Then we begin to value their lives—even if they don’t have electricity or tap water.

I think respect for human rights really comes down to the willingness of people to understand that, regardless of how people live their lives and the circumstances they’re in, the sacrosanct nature of each human life is the same.

I don’t think we have gotten to that point as human beings where we truly believe that all life is valuable. We put a different value on different lives. I think that is the biggest problem, because once we begin to understand that each person’s life is absolutely valuable, regardless of what our differences are, that would compel us to try to defend that life, to try to take care of it when it’s threatened.

So I wanted to put that human context in the story, but more importantly, I wanted to speak about the strength of the human spirit, particularly of the children who were dragged into this war; not only how they fall into this madness, but how they come out of it—the possibility that is there. Some of us have been able to see that strength because life has thrown us into difficult times, but all of us have that strength within us, and I want people to really believe that.

The Cost of War

What I learned after I came out of this war is that when you are in a violent situation, one that only creates fear and distrust, it doesn’t even allow you the luxury to know yourself, to know your own capacity to do something else. What fear and intimidation does is prevent you from connecting with people, from seeing other people’s humanity.

I wanted to show people, particularly young people, that violence, war, is not as romantic and fascinating as people think it is. There’s a fascination with it because people are removed from the reality of it.

You see Hollywood films where somebody is going into battle and there is music in the background—rock ‘n’ roll! Somebody in a gunfight will pull out their phone and call their wife or girlfriend to tell them they love them. These are Hollywood realities of what war is like. The reality of war—there is no background music first of all! Second, you don’t have the luxury...
to call your girlfriend. You don’t have the luxury to even love yourself.

During war you dehumanize other people in order to take their lives. But when you dehumanize somebody, when you hate somebody severely even without war, what it does, in reverse, is that you hate yourself and you dehumanize yourself. And it takes a lot of undoing to undo that, regardless of what the reason is for that war. But people don’t want to believe these things because then we would not have people joining armies to fight.

When I was in the war, apart from the coercion, one of the motivating things about it was that we would avenge the death of our families. I really believed it deeply. But when I was removed from the war and I began to make friends with kids who were in the different groups that fought the war, I found out they had been told the same rhetoric. They were told we were responsible for what happened to them and that we didn’t deserve to live. Everyone had the same rhetoric but a different enemy. So we went out with this hate, and we took other people’s lives who had nothing to do with what had happened to us. And the people who survived those massacres had more reason to be part of this madness. We were creating a cycle of violence.

When I was removed from the war and learned this reality, it was so difficult for me to handle: to understand that we have actually perpetuated this thing, when we thought we were doing something to prevent it. I realized that revenge doesn’t do anything for anyone at all. It’s only through forgiveness that understanding comes about.

The Power of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is also a word that people throw around quite a lot. It’s not easy—it’s absolutely difficult. When you forgive somebody, it allows you to transform the situation, so that people can learn from it. But forgiveness has a practical side too. It’s not just about saying, “I forgive you.” It’s also a process.

When I was a child in Sierra Leone, when someone wronged another in the community the punishment was you spent time with the person you have wronged helping them work on their farm. When you have to eat from the same plate, you have to rest together, you have to go to the river together—you repair the relationship that has been damaged.

Punitive measures do not really provide us the understanding of how to prevent the reoccurrence of something that has happened.

So for me, the willingness to see people’s humanity, to learn to forgive, to learn about other people’s lives and culture—when we can do these things I think it will be very difficult to make a case for war.

I am always quite amazed when I go to conferences where there are youth from all over the world—from Brazil, from Iraq, from Afghanistan—and they all sit in the room and they talk. Sometimes people say, “Well, what will that really do?” Perhaps nothing comes of it, but what is important is that people make friends with other people of the world.

Ten, 15 years from now, if any of those kids who were in that room becomes a leader in Afghanistan or Iraq or the United States, they’re less likely to engage in war.

There is so much that is overwhelming when you turn on the television, when you read the news, people sometimes feel that there’s nothing they can do: “What will my contribution do? The problem is so big.” If everyone felt that way, then none of the problems would be fixed. If everyone had thought, “Oh, these kids that are dragged into this war—it’s sad, but what can I do?” I wouldn’t be standing in front of you. I am, because there are people who are willing to say, “Alright, we can do our part.” Each one of us, our contribution is absolutely valuable and important.
\textbf{Ikeda}: Buddhism teaches the principle of “cherry, plum, peach and apricot”—that all things have their own unique beauty and mission. The cherry has its distinct beauty. The plum has its delicate fragrance. The peach blossom has its lovely color. And the apricot has its special flavor. Every person has a singular mission, their own individuality and way of living. It’s important to recognize that truth and respect it.

Unfortunately, in our human world it does not always work this way. Some find it impossible to respect those who are different, so they discriminate against them or pick on them. They violate those people’s rights as individuals. This is the source of much unhappiness in the world.

Everyone has a right to flower, to reveal their full potential as a human being, to fulfill their mission in this world. You have it, and so does everyone else. That is the meaning of human rights. To scorn and violate people’s human rights serves to destroy the whole natural order of things. We must become people who prize human rights and respect others.

\textbf{Kimura}: We may see discrimination and bullying in our immediate surroundings, or they can take extreme forms, such as war and oppression. Do you think these are basically the same thing?

\textbf{Ikeda}: Yes. It is sometimes said that bullying is just war in miniature. Pettiness, arrogance, jealousy and self-centeredness—all of those base and destructive emotions violate human rights. On a larger scale, they manifest as war and crime.

\textbf{Igeta}: In most European countries, discrimination is viewed as a criminal offense. In that sense, Japan is still an underdeveloped country as far as human rights are concerned.

\textbf{Ikeda}: Many people have said as much. Our distorted society is responsible in no small part for the bullying that plagues our schools.

Whatever the reason or motive, bullying and discrimination are impossible to justify.

We are all human beings; that is what matters. But most Japanese think of themselves as Japanese first, and members of the human family second. Such is the narrow-minded island-nation mentality of Japan. There is a tendency to reject and attack anything that is the least bit different.

\textbf{Kimura}: The constitution guarantees respect for basic human rights, but structural discrimination that violates those rights is still deeply entrenched.

\textbf{Ikeda}: We have to raise people’s awareness of human rights through education. Our schools and religions must teach human rights, and our government must respect human rights.

Unless we can build a society that regards human beings not as a means to a goal but as the goal itself, we will remain forever a society of discrimination, unhappiness and inequality—a world of animality where the strong prey upon the weak. We will simply repeat the same patterns.

\textbf{Kimura}: Unless our commitment to human rights has a basis in a profound philosophy and view of humanity, our words will ring hollow.

\textbf{Ikeda}: Yes. To study human rights
we must study philosophy. But just as important as philosophy is the willingness to stand up for our beliefs and take action. Human rights will never be won unless we speak out, unless we fight to secure them. Even if human rights are protected and guaranteed by law and government policy, ceaseless efforts are necessary to ensure that they are indeed upheld; otherwise those rights will become empty, a reality in name only. This is because power, whether it be the power of national governments or any other institution or organization, is a demonic force that despises human rights. Securing human rights protects the individual, based on the awareness that each person is precious and irreplaceable. The purpose of upholding human rights is to enable all people to live with dignity and realize their potential. But power looks on people as a mass, not as individuals. It treats them as objects, as numbers and statistics. Every sphere of human endeavor—education, culture, science, politics, business and economics—must guarantee and foster human rights or come to a dead end. In education, for example, schools should exist for the sake of the students, yet today it is as if the students exist for the sake of the schools. We need to refocus on the importance of benefiting humanity, and make a fresh departure from there. That is how human rights are established.

Living with Dignity

Igeta: A high school student has a question: “I suffer a physical disability. People in school and in the streets make fun of me. I don’t know what to do about this. Could you advise me?”

Ikeda: Essentially, you have to become stronger. That, too, is part of the struggle for human rights. Having your rights as a human being recognized by others is not just a matter of having people behave sympathetically toward you. You must be proud of yourself as an individual, regardless of your disability. You must be proud of your personal mission. Those who laugh at you and make fun of you are cruel and wrong, and they are creating negative karma for themselves by ignoring your right to be treated as a human being. Letting their taunts get to you is a defeat for human rights. Your strength, however, is a victory for human rights.

I have met and engaged in dialogue with champions of human rights the world over: Linus Pauling of the United States, Austregésilo de Athayde of Brazil, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel of Argentina, B. N. Pande of India, and many others. All of them were gentle people, and all of them were strong people. They had the strength to endure the hardships of persecution or imprisonment, yet by just meeting them you sensed a warm responsiveness and sensitivity to others’ feelings.

One such gentle yet strong individual, Rosa Parks, fought against racial discrimination in the United States. Even at the height of discrimination against African-Americans, she refused to ride in the elevators marked “Colored.” Unable to compromise with such discrimination, she took the stairs. She resented riding on the buses where the seating was segregated and often chose to walk long distances instead. One hot summer day, her throat was parched; but rather than drink from the “Colored” water fountain, she went thirsty. Mrs. Parks has written, “I have never allowed myself to be treated as a second-class citizen. You must respect yourself before others can respect you.”

One must live with dignity. Character is the foundation of human rights. We must build a society that has more than its short-term profit as a goal. The first step is to respect ourselves and live with dignity.

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A Window on the Future
Youth Perspectives on Human Rights

The SGI Quarterly interviewed three representatives to the 2008 Junior 8 Summit about their views on human and child rights. The Junior 8 Summit is an initiative launched by UNICEF in 2005, where young people from around the world meet in parallel with the G8 Summit to share their concerns and recommendations on how to solve global issues with G8 leaders and representatives of the international community.

How did you first learn about human rights?

Je-Meila Maloney: I first learned about human rights and child rights from my mother. When I questioned her, she made me aware of why she did certain things. She explained that everyone has rights and that it was her uppermost responsibility to ensure that my rights as a child were exercised.

Jasper Warner: I think especially for my generation it’s an inherent part of our upbringing, and there is constant reference to it in the media.

Alexander Wegner: Even though I am only 17 years old, I have had the chance to travel to several countries all around the world and have lived in communities of various ethnic groups. The more I experienced, the more I wanted to know about the circumstances other people live in and the daily problems they face. What I then realized was that there are many people whose rights simply are ignored and violated, causing them to live in an unfortunate situation.

How would a world where human rights are treasured and protected — where there is a “culture” of human rights — be different from the world you experience today?

Jasper: It would be a world free of discrimination where anyone has the potential to be what they want to be. This would be a world where needless suffering is unheard of. Essentially the principles that are most important to us all are embodied by the term “human rights,” such as justice, fairness, kindness and brotherhood for all.

Je-Meila: The first thought that comes to my mind is peace. Peace would definitely be the difference. When you treasure and protect the rights of not only yourself but others, you are essentially at peace and by extension you are spreading that peace. Peace brings an end to violence, all forms of abuse, stigma and most importantly an end to the ignorance that comes with a lack of knowledge of human rights.

Alexander: Human rights are fundamental for a modern society, a society in which everyone’s life is valuable and where tolerance and peace are no longer extraordinary. A world in which human rights are protected is one which uses diplomacy in cases of conflict and which sets equal standards for people regardless of their nationality, race, gender, age, religion and any other differences. Countries have the responsibility to educate their citizens about their rights.

Do you feel as a young person that your rights and dignity are respected?

Jasper: Whilst I feel that all my most basic rights are upheld in Britain, such as living in a peaceful environment where there is access to food, shelter...
and clean drinking water, too often youth are patronized and not included in the decisions that affect our lives. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that it is young people’s right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. But there is a de facto situation whereby only those who are members of the electorate are appealed to.

**Je-Meila:** There is the misconception that as a young person one does not have enough life experience to impart an opinion on significant matters such as global issues.

**Alexander:** Children and young people today are much more recognized and have the possibility to make their voices heard, but unfortunately the status of children and young people varies considerably from society to society. Only when highly developed nations fully implement the rights of the child and take young people’s concerns seriously, will further progress be made. Major steps toward respecting young people, such as the Junior 8 Summit, have already been made, but more opportunities to speak out and influence decisions made by adults need to follow.

**Can you give an example of when you have defended your own or someone else’s human rights or child rights?**

**Alexander:** I was adopted at the age of two weeks; I am colored, and my parents as well as the rest of my family are white. Even though my family supported and loved me at all times, I often had to defend my rights within society in order to be respected. At an early age I learned not to treat people differently because of the differences between me and them. Often I had to stand up for my right to be accepted, and I have defended others who were not treated equally because of certain differences. Still today I speak out whenever I see that people are not treated equally and are not accepted and tolerated.

**Je-Meila:** I remember when many of my classmates did not want to speak or even play with another classmate. I remembered what my mum had told me about everyone being equal, and played with him. This of course caused some of my classmates to tell me that they would not play with me. I also remember arguing and telling them what my mother had told me. Being children, the issue was quickly resolved, but I found that afterwards my classmates were different in their approach as they respected each other more. As trivial as this may seem to some, this was very significant to me.

**Jasper:** By attending the J8 conference, which is a summit with the aim of ensuring that children participate in global politics, I was ensuring that children had a voice on a global stage.

I was defending children’s right to be involved.

**How can you help build a culture of human rights and child rights among your family, friends and in your neighborhood?**

**Je-Meila:** I am truly blessed to live in my country where human rights and child rights are respected. I am president of a local youth organization called the Emerging Global Leaders of Barbados which looks at the empowerment of young people as we seek to make them more aware of social issues and global concerns. I believe in living a life of example, simply because the reality is that I could talk to you about human rights and child rights, but if I do not respect you and respect your rights, then my talking is in vain.

**Alexander:** Through “Youth-4-Unity,” an initiative I founded in 2007, I spread awareness on child and human rights as well as issues such as poverty, which are directly connected to those rights. The more people heard about this issue, the more people wanted to become active themselves. For this reason I believe that a culture of human rights can only be created when the majority of people know their rights. Therefore I started to talk to people in my community and family so that they know about human rights and child rights. From my experience I know that activism comes from knowledge, and that is why young people should be educated
about child and human rights in schools.

**Jasper:** The principles of human rights revolve around respect for each other. By making sure first of all that everyone is aware of human rights—and often the lack of human rights around the world—people can be motivated to further this culture of human rights.

**Visions**

*If you were Emperor of the Earth for one day, what would you do to try to make human rights and child rights a reality?*

**Alexander:** To make child rights a reality, all countries have to ratify the CRC and make the convention part of their national law. Article 42 of the convention says that governments should make the convention known to all parents and children. As the Emperor of the Earth, I would focus on spreading awareness, which starts within families and needs to continue in schools and the media. Furthermore I would establish committees that monitor the implementation of child and human rights by working closely together with families and governments. I truly believe human rights as well as child rights will no longer be violated when people are aware.

**Jasper:** I would distribute wealth around the world so that those with the most give to those with the least. I would also make sure that all the countries under my rule were run by democratic governments. I would create free trade. I would send emissaries to let everyone know what their human rights were.

**Je-Meila:** I would have every nation ratify and continue to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the CRC. I would also endorse a substantial amount of money to the United Nations and endorse a separate substantial amount to UNICEF.

The reality is that I could pass laws, hold a conference or give a speech, but actions speak louder than words. So I would leave office and go and do hands-on work in as many countries as I could cover in that day, in the hope that my example would be followed by many.

**As a young person, what is your most heartfelt request of today’s leaders?**

**Jasper:** Don’t just make promises, keep them. On your decisions millions of people live or die.

**Je-Meila:** My most heartfelt request for today’s leaders as a young person would be to humble themselves. When one is humble, you are aware of others. Sad to say, some of our leaders have lost that, and they fail to acknowledge their responsibilities as leaders by not following up on their words with positive action. Everyone talks of international cooperation as a solution, but this can truly be enhanced when you have humility dwelling within the minds, hearts and souls of all of our leaders.

**Alexander:** I ask today’s leaders to take young people and our concerns more seriously. We are young individuals who care about the world we live in. The decisions that are made by political leaders today directly affect the future of children and young people around the world. Our concerns, ideas and proposals must be taken more seriously, and our voices must be heard at all times, especially when politicians and young people come together as is the case at every face-to-face meeting of Junior 8 youth delegates and G8 heads of state. Confucius already discovered that a great leader has to be a role model for the people he governs. I ask today’s leaders to be aware of their responsibility and to act not only in the interest of their citizens but in the interest of the global community. Whenever today’s leaders make a decision, they should keep in mind what the philosopher Immanuel Kant once said: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Je-Meila Maloney, 17, is from Barbados; Jasper Warner, 16, is from the U.K.; and Alexander Wegner, 17, is from Germany. Go to www.j8summit.com to read the experiences of Junior 8 participants and the 13-point Chitose Declaration on tackling climate change, poverty and development, and global health and infectious diseases issued by the Junior 8 Summit during the G8 Summit held in Hokkaido, Japan, in July 2008.
A Means to an End

Interview with Brad Adams

Brad Adams has been executive director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division since 2002. Previously he worked as the senior lawyer for the Cambodia field office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and legal adviser to the Cambodian parliament’s human rights committee.

SGIQ: How would you explain human rights to someone who’s never heard of them?

Brad Adams: It’s as simple as saying, “You can’t do certain things to me without violating a law, and you can’t tell me what to think.” The history of the world has been full of feudalism and dictatorship with powerful people telling powerless people what they can and can’t do. The concepts of human rights are a way of saying that there are limits on this.

SGIQ: Do you think human beings have an innate sense of human rights that is universal?

BA: Yes. I have no doubt about that. Unfortunately temptations like power and money lead people to argue that only some people have rights, or that groups are more important than individuals, which is something we only hear from the powerful, not the weak and poor. People used to talk about “Asian values” being in opposition to human rights principles, but what Asian wants to be tortured by some police officer or soldier? Nobody thinks that’s acceptable. What Asian wants to have their land taken away by some rich guy with a gun? These things really are universal.

I’m not trying to say that everybody grows up in the same environment and culture, but I am saying that many basic things are the same everywhere. I think that really there is no debate now about what basic rights are. The challenges for human rights now are largely about holding the people in power accountable, and this is where human rights and politics overlap. In the long run real improvement on rights does require political change or political development.

SGIQ: Do you think in order to push for political change there has to be an educated public that is demanding that change?

BA: Sometimes change comes from the bottom up, such as the ousting of President Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 or the ending of the monarchy in Nepal this year. Sometimes change comes from the top down. If you look at Europe and the abolition of the death penalty, actually the political elite made the change. It’s not always driven by the public, but it’s much better if the public is on board and educated and believing in it, otherwise you can have a new government come in and just reverse things.

I think human rights education is at its best in civics lessons in primary and secondary education. Educating adults—with all the problems they are facing in their daily lives—about human rights is complicated. Take the death penalty. We’re taught from day one in all cultures that killing is wrong. If that’s your bedrock principle and you learn that when you are young, it would be very easy for you to get past all the other arguments in favor of state-sanctioned killing, which is what the death penalty is. But if you don’t have that bedrock principle, then you can convince yourself that it is OK.

Films are one very good way of raising awareness, as by seeing what happened to someone else, people will say, “Now I see why it’s important for the army to be under control, or for...
there to be international laws against torture.” People are touched emotionally, and some of them may take action as a result. The media also has a big role to play.

SGIQ: Do you think the situation is improving globally?

BA: The trend is uneven, but in its historical scope it is very positive. Most countries are at least accepting that in principle they must be more rule-based. The Internet and media are putting everybody under much more scrutiny.

We’ve been doing a huge amount of work on the Olympics, and a lot of people who come to China for the first time in a long time are quite surprised. Even in a one-party state, the government has to spend a lot of time explaining to the people what they’re doing and why they are doing it. And there is a huge amount of demand from the public in China for basic freedoms. People are constantly challenging the authorities. Of course, many still end up in prison or are beaten up by state security, so we have to be vigilant and demand an end to these practices, wherever they occur.

SGIQ: What motivated you to work in this field?

BA: I was initially a legal aid lawyer in California, trying to provide access to the justice system to poor people, homeless people, to get their basic economic rights, because at the time that seemed to be the most pressing human rights problem in the U.S.

For me, it’s about allowing everyone to pursue happiness. It’s not about enforcing rights for their own sake. Rights are a means to a happy end. We’re just trying to create the conditions for people to get what they can and want out of life and not be blocked by dictators or other powerful forces. This is one reason we focus so much on freedom of speech, since it is a necessary precondition for this. But if we’re just trying to get these rights as some kind of legalistic thing, it doesn’t necessarily improve people’s lives.

Paving a Way to Dignity

From an interview with Khadija Al-Salami

The SGI Quarterly spoke with Khadija Al-Salami, born in Sanaa, Yemen, the first female filmmaker and producer from that country. Her early years as a young woman fighting for her own independence in extreme circumstances are described in her autobiography, The Tears of Sheba (2003). She has produced several documentaries about women in Yemen including Amina (2006), A Stranger in Her Own City (2005), Yemen of a Thousand Faces (2000) and Women of Islam (1995). She is also the press and cultural counsellor for the Embassy of Yemen in Paris.

When I first read the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood,” I thought it was quoting my own thoughts. I have always said, “Everybody was born free and has the right to live in freedom and live with human dignity.” That is what I have been saying for so long. It inspired me to be what I am right now. In fact I cannot live without these things—if I didn’t have my freedom or my dignity or my human rights.

In my films I allow women to tell their own stories. Women in Yemen have some difficulty in telling their own stories freely without being afraid of what people are going to say, or accuse them of. For me, making films allows women to express themselves without any fear. In our culture women are not used to being given a chance, and when I give them a chance, it is a shock for society, but then people get used to it. That is the only way to get rid of the bad habits. I don’t want people to see me as a female—I want to be seen as a human being. We are all born in the same way, and we both have the same mind, and men and women complement each other, and that is important, but it doesn’t mean that he is better or that I am better. From what I learned as a child growing up in Yemen, Islam doesn’t distinguish between females and males. The Qur’an addresses both sexes; it shows the equality already. A story from the Qur’an that they don’t tell so often is that the Prophet’s first wife was a businesswoman. The Prophet used to work for her, she was older than him, and she was a businesswoman. That is the biggest example for me; women had a role, with independence and dignity, and they were equal to men. From what I learned, Islam taught freedom and dignity for everyone and that everyone is equal.

But there have indeed been times in my own life when I felt that my dignity
was not being respected at all. When I was 11 years old, I was forced into an early marriage, but I did not accept the oppression and I am glad that I did not, because I am really happy in my life right now. Otherwise I would not be able to travel, and instead I would be a grandmother already.

**Changing Perceptions**

However, after this long experience, I now feel that I am truly respected. At first I wanted to show that I was different, but people could not understand me, because I was a girl, and a woman. Even my own family could not understand why I wanted to do these things. But later on when I attended school and I did what I felt was respectworthy for myself, I started to gain their respect and their admiration.

I feel great now because I can see that there are changes; people now look at me with a look as if to say, “You are different,” but at the same time I am also successful. Men were the ones who really opposed me, but now women from our family and other families wish their daughters to follow the same path that I did. It was very hard, but in the end you reach your goal, and that is important. My goal is to be free, to be respectworthy, to be dignified.

I look for the basic things. We are all born free, we all have choices in our lives. I asked for basic needs and I got them. But in my culture it was not easy at that time; I had to fight for them. I used to be the bad example, now I am the good example.

I receive a lot of e-mails these days from Yemeni girls, saying, “You are our example, and when we grow up, we want to be like you,” and that makes me happy. I would never have imagined that one day I would be the example. I just wanted to live my own life and have my own choice. But it’s great that I became an example for these girls.

I believe education plays a vital role. Until 1962 there weren’t even schools for women in the northern part of Yemen. Then we had the revolution, and schools were built by the government. Girls and boys were both encouraged to go, but unfortunately the families were afraid to send their daughters to school. For them it was a new experience and it was bad. My grandmother told me that school is dangerous. I asked her, “Why is it dangerous?” And she answered, “Because if you learn to write and read, you will start writing love letters.” People were ignorant, they did not know any better, but now you will see that most of the girls are in schools. The more girls are educated, the more they know their rights, and how to protect themselves and how to defend themselves and also how they can live and be useful to society, themselves and their families.

If I could do one thing to change the world and make human rights a reality, I would establish a firm law that education is an absolute obligation, because through education we can make better people. I would also really apply it strictly. States that didn’t apply it would be punished. They always apply punishments to the countries that make weapons of mass destruction, but ignorance also breeds a lot of destructive behavior.
Hope in the Future
By Shantha Sinha

Shantha Sinha’s work has helped hundreds of thousands of children leave work and get an education. She and the more than 80,000 volunteers throughout India who support her cause are also changing attitudes toward child marriage and other practices that deny children the right to a normal childhood. Here she shares her reflections on the emergence of a culture of human rights.

We live in a world of inherent contradictions. On the one hand, we are witness to the cruelest of crimes and violence perpetrated against humanity through organized actions and the insensitivities of structures of power and authority—even sometimes from among those seeking to change the existing power balances in the world today.

On the other, we see the unfolding of the finest of human values in the simple and noble actions of ordinary people in their daily lives, in leaders and visionaries with moral authority striking a chord of hope for millions of people. We witness the triumph of seekers of truth and justice based on a love for their fellow human beings that is without borders.

Good people exist everywhere, in villages and towns, cities and nations—they are all around us. It is their courage and conviction, their magnanimity and tolerance, their ability to transcend hatred and their love of humanity that has kept the fabric of contemporary society intact. These ordinary qualities are able to transform the current of society—they are the bedrock of a culture of peace and of human rights.

Transformations

In our work for the abolition of child labor through education, we have witnessed many such outstanding transformations. One volunteer was threatened by an employer who was using child labor, who actually wished to have her killed. However, after seeing the conduct of the volunteer as well as our actual work for the children, he became one of the strongest supporters of the movement.

Similarly, as our organization promoted children’s right to education in villages that were controlled by dacoits [bandits], the dacoits overcame their initial hostility and came forward to engage in dialogue with us based on our common wish for a better future for their children.

We have seen time and again how the most simple and ordinary people can bring about the greatest changes.

Hope in the Future
Shantha Sinha together with some of the children whose rights she champions

“We have seen time and again how the most simple and ordinary people can bring about the greatest changes.”

Shantha Sinha is the founder of the M. V. Foundation and chairperson of India’s National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights. In 2003 she won the Ramon Magsaysay Award—considered Asia’s Nobel Prize—for Community Leadership. She is a professor in the Department of Political Science at Hyderabad Central University.

Gaining strength from the inspiring examples of those who work for the good of others, it is so important to re-instill our faith and trust in all and not to give up on anyone. I have seen the impact of trust in my work, as hundreds of thousands of children have been able to leave work and go to school, as difficult employers have chosen to be part of the child rights movement, as schoolteachers have begun to teach and enjoy children, and as parents have gained the confidence to sacrifice and do all they can to see their children educated.

Hope in the future, hope that is founded on the force of moral authority, will certainly inspire profound actions for the celebration and uplifting of the human spirit. This path of nonviolence, tolerance and magnanimity for harmonizing societies is not easy, but can there be any other alternative to this for a better society?
“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), calling upon all member states to publicize the text of the Declaration and “to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories.”

The Declaration consists of a preamble and 30 articles, setting out a broad range of fundamental human rights and freedoms to which all men and women, everywhere in the world, are entitled, without any distinction. It was the first official international recognition that all human beings have fundamental rights and freedoms, and the first time that the rights and freedoms of individuals had ever been set forth in such detail.

The drafting process of the UDHR involved representatives from all regions and drew inspiration from values, belief systems and political traditions from different cultures and societies across the globe. It was to be a common statement of mutual aspirations—a shared vision of a more equitable and just world—and has become today a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations and the foundation for an expanding system of human rights protection.

The UDHR has been translated into over 360 different languages, making it the most widely translated document in the world. See: [www.unhchr.ch/udhr/](http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Preamble

*Whereas* 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,

*Whereas* disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

*Whereas* it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

*Whereas* it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

*Whereas* the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

*Whereas* Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

*Whereas* a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

**Now, therefore,**

**The General Assembly**

**Proclaims** this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.
Universal Declaration

Article 1.
All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.
Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.
Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4.
No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.
No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.
Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7.
All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8.
Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9.
No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10.
Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.
(1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12.
No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.

Article 13.
(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14.
(1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15.
(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.
(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16.
(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17.
(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18.
Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19.
Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive
and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

**Article 20.**
(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

**Article 21.**
(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

**Article 22.**
Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

**Article 23.**
(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

**Article 24.**
Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

**Article 25.**
(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

**Article 26.**
(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

**Article 27.**
(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

**Article 28.**
Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

**Article 29.**
(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

**Article 30.**
Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.
Shaping History

Throughout history, popular uprisings have often occurred in reaction to inhumane treatment and injustice. The English Bill of Rights in 1689, drafted after the English Civil Wars, sprang from the people’s aspiration for democracy. Exactly a century later, the French Revolution gave rise to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and its proclamation of equality for all. But the Cyrus Cylinder, issued in 539 BCE by Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid Persian Empire (ancient Iran) after his conquest of Babylon, is said by many to be the first human rights document, and the Pact of the Virtuous (Hilf-al-Fudul), concluded by the Arab tribes around 590 CE, is considered one of the first human rights alliances.

After World War II and the creation of the United Nations, the international community vowed never again to allow such devastating conflict. World leaders decided to complement the UN Charter with a document which would guarantee the rights of every individual everywhere, always.

The task was taken up at the first session of the General Assembly in 1946. Later, the work of drafting a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was entrusted to a formal drafting committee, consisting of members of the Commission on Human Rights from eight states, selected with due regard for geographical distribution. Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, chaired the UDHR drafting committee and is recognized as the driving force for the Declaration’s adoption.

Ongoing Struggle

The Declaration represents a contract between governments and their peoples, who have a right to demand that this document be respected. Many former colonies drew on its ideals in drafting their first constitutions as independent countries in the 1950s and 60s.

The UDHR drafters’ vision has inspired many human rights defenders who have struggled over the last six decades to make that vision a reality. The struggle is far from over. As the Declaration’s custodians and beneficiaries, all of us must reclaim the UDHR, make it our own and help make universal human rights a reality for all. In our efforts lies the power of the UDHR: it is a living document that will continue to inspire generations to come.

(Learn more at www.knowyourrights2008.org and www.ohchr.org. Text adapted from these sites)
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaimed in Paris on December 10, 1948, represented a unifying foundation for humanity. It was the first occasion on which the community of nations, organized under the newly formed United Nations organization (UN), agreed on the “inalienable rights of all members of the human family” and codified them in the Declaration as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.”

At that time, the UN was composed of 58 states with different philosophical, cultural and political traditions. The Declaration therefore was a reflection of these various perspectives; it represented the meeting point of different conceptions of human beings and society. The UDHR developed the human rights provisions included in the 1945 United Nations Charter, which resolved in its preamble “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.”

Knowledge and Skills

After its proclamation, UDHR principles inspired the anticolonial struggle and were inserted in the constitutions of the newly independent countries. The UDHR also prompted the development of the vast body of international human rights law which exists today, including both legal instruments and mechanisms for human rights protection, and served as the basis and inspiration for all regional human rights systems.

When proclaiming the Declaration, the UN General Assembly affirmed in the preamble: “every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.”

“Human rights education is an action-oriented process.”

Human rights education is vital to building a universal culture of human rights. In order to contribute to this goal, education needs to address not only knowledge of human rights standards and the mechanisms for their protection, but also the skills necessary for people to apply human rights principles in daily life; it must develop values and reinforce attitudes which uphold them, so as to prompt action to defend and promote human rights. Human rights education is therefore an action-oriented process.

Today, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) contributes to global human rights education by facilitating information-sharing and networking among all those involved in human rights education globally, through, for instance, a web-based Database on Human Rights Education and Training, accessible through OHCHR’s website, and a special Resource Collection on Human Rights Education and Training in the OHCHR Library; and by developing and disseminating selected materials. To support UN system-wide coordination, OHCHR bolsters the Secretariat of the United Nations Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee on Human Rights Education in the School System; it also assists UN member states and others with technical cooperation and expert advice, as well as grassroots initiatives through the Assisting Communities Together (ACT) Project, a joint initiative with the United Nations Development Programme providing small grants to national and local non-governmental organizations.

In recent years human rights education has become more and more present on the international agenda, and programs as well as partnerships among various national and international actors have increased; however, there are still challenges ahead. One of these is a lack of political will to undertake comprehensive and sustainable programming; another is a lack of national and international monitoring and evaluation systems for human rights education. There is a need for further collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors, and the need to develop appropriate methodologies, including research on impact. Major contextual problems facing human rights education include poverty, political instability, illiteracy and cultural traditions in contrast with human rights standards.

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A culture of human rights requires more than being able to live free from abuses—as critically important as that is. Rather, a culture of human rights can be thought of as a constellation of positive values, at the heart of which is a deep sense of the inherent value and dignity of each human life.

Human rights abuses arise ultimately from deeply rooted tendencies in human life. These include such negative attitudes and emotions as prejudice, intolerance, ignorance and fear. Even where strong negative emotions or intentions are not present, the more widely dispersed feelings of indifference and apathy—our unfortunate capacity to ignore or forget the dire circumstances of other human beings—play a critical role in enabling human rights abuses to occur and continue.

Building a rich and robust culture of human rights involves the struggle, waged in each human heart, to resist and transform these negative impulses. Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks and others have taken a stand for the rights of all people, often at great personal risk. But even if we don’t confront extreme situations—and even if we feel we lack the courage of these remarkable individuals—we can each, in our own lives, make a significant contribution to building a culture of human rights.

A profound change in the inner life of just one person can be the start of a process that can transform whole societies, helping us move toward the ideal of a world in which all people can enjoy their lives in security, dignity and happiness. This perspective is at the heart of the philosophy of Buddhism, which places great stress on the power of the individual to effect change.

Our personal interactions are a key battleground in the struggle for universal human dignity. Consistently treating people with respect for their inherent dignity—their worth as human beings—is a challenge we can take on anytime, anywhere.

Interconnection and interdependence are key concepts in Buddhism, expressed by the parable of two bundles of reeds that will stand only if they support each other. The words of Martin Luther King, Jr.—“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”—are in this sense not a moral injunction, but a description of the reality we inhabit and live daily. When we understand this, we naturally develop a sense of empathetic connection and solidarity with other people around the world.

The UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), and its succeeding global framework, the World Programme for Human Rights Education, require proactive efforts by each individual in all nations. Dissemination of information is a key element of human rights education. However, knowledge alone does not create the kind of engaged and committed attitudes that are needed. Human rights education should sensitize and empower individuals with the determination to respect one another, recognizing that, given the interdependent nature of life, respect for the rights of others is ultimately a necessary condition for ensuring respect for one’s own rights.

Based on the commitment and philosophy outlined above, the SGI has been working to actively support efforts to build a culture of human rights.

The current phase of the SGI’s efforts in this regard dates from 1990. At his meeting in November of that year with then African National Congress (ANC) Chairman Nelson Mandela, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda announced several initia-
atives related to human rights: holding an exhibition on the theme of human rights; arranging an antiapartheid photo exhibition; and sponsoring public lectures on human rights.

In 1991, Soka Gakkai hosted an antiapartheid photo exhibition in several Japanese cities, viewed by 100,000 people. A human rights public lecture series was held in Japan and Italy, inviting speakers from the ANC.

**Grassroots Awareness**

Then in 1993, the SGI launched the exhibition “Toward a Century of Humanity: An Overview of Human Rights in Today’s World,” later held at the United Nations Office at Geneva in cooperation with the then UN Centre for Human Rights. As a resource supporting the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, it was viewed by more than 500,000 people including many schoolchildren in 40 venues in eight countries. Various side events on human rights themes were organized in parallel involving local community groups and schools in order to raise public awareness.

The SGI has also organized exhibitions on other themes such as the Holocaust, children’s rights and the rights of refugees. In 2001, SGI-Italy launched the exhibition “The City of Human Rights.” Visitors entered the exhibition through a tunnel as “refugees” and emerged from the other end through a city hall as “citizens.” Such exhibitions have created important public spaces in which learning is shared and people are empowered to confront difficult realities in ways that might not be possible alone with a video or book.

They have also served as a focal point for related events, such as seminars, puppet shows, concerts, etc. Stressing firsthand experience and agency, many of these events have featured the voices of people who have been directly impacted by human rights abuses.

Other SGI human rights initiatives in different countries have focused on stopping bullying in schools, treasuring diversity and building interfaith and intercultural communication and understanding. Typically organized in collaboration with other civil society organizations, these events help generate a multidimensional learning environment offering both information and inspiration.

From around the year 2001, midway through the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, NGOs became increasingly vocal in their advocacy of human rights education as an important global strategy toward strengthening respect for human rights. In August 2001, a statement by Mr. Ikeda, in which he called for a global framework for human rights education, was presented at a roundtable on Education for Human Rights and Peace at the NGO Forum held in parallel with the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa.

Focusing on influencing global policymaking at the former UN Commission on Human Rights, the SGI continued networking with many NGOs and other civil society actors, contributing to the process of UN General Assembly adoption on December 10, 2004, of the resolution that proclaimed the World Programme of Human Rights Education as a successor to the Decade.

In May 2006, the SGI collaborated with other NGOs to form the NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning in Geneva. This is a specialized NGO network body within the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CONGO). Currently, I am serving as chair of this NGO Working Group, networking and cooperating in partnership with other NGOs and actors.

The SGI is committed to continuing our efforts in pursuit of humanity’s common objective—dignity for all, and the crucial work of constructing a culture of human rights.

Kazunari Fujii is the SGI’s representative to the UN in Geneva and chair of the NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education & Learning of CONGO Geneva.

“Knowledge alone does not create the kind of engaged and committed attitudes that are needed. Human rights education should sensitize and empower individuals with the determination to respect one another.”
Living with Integrity

By Elizabeth Norwood, U.S.A.

When I began practicing Buddhism 34 years ago, I didn’t have high expectations. But as I continued to strive in my practice, my career rapidly improved until I was appointed assistant superintendent of my local school district in California.

In time, a new superintendent was appointed, and my responsibilities changed to supervising 24 elementary schools. When I visited the schools, I met with the stark reality of filthy buildings in disrepair. Eleven of the schools were in dire condition, endangering children and adults. Water often leaked through the roofs, bathrooms were unusable and raw sewage welled from the sinks.

Time after time, principals had begged for repairs to be made. Conditions only worsened. In contrast, my office was new and clean with beautiful furnishings. I wondered how we could claim to be people of integrity who are committed to children amid such clear disparities.

Buddhism is action, so I detailed the conditions and recommended solutions. I attached to each report the many, many requests for repairs that the principals of those schools had made. I also included photographs of the areas of blight.

I knew that if I didn’t report these conditions, nothing would happen. I also knew that if I made my report—showing proof of our neglect to maintain our schools—I would surely lose my job. However, I couldn’t continue to work in a fine office while these children studied in such a terrible environment.

I submitted the report to the superintendent. I was soon told that I was no longer needed in my position and that my assistant would take over my job. I was provided with a desk at the back corner of the building and was not assigned any work.

Although I predicted this outcome, the reality was not easy for me. Every day, I had to walk to my desk in the back corner passing the people I had once supervised, taking in muted comments, sideways glances and whispers along the way.

I decided that I would not be defeated. Having no assignments, I developed my own projects, visiting schools and offering my assistance. I took workshops in community development. I developed programs and assisted in implementing and monitoring them.

Principals began to request my services. I became quite busy.

One day, the superintendent called me into his office to evaluate my performance. I shared with him a portfolio of my work and accomplishments since my demotion. He then tried to assign me to a number of even lower positions, but his plan backfired due to district policies. My boss finally assigned me principal of two continuation high schools. One school enrolled students who had been expelled for carrying weapons, drunkenness and other violations. The other was for pregnant and parenting high school girls and their small children.

I will always remember the first student council we elected. These were students who had never taken on leadership. They were open to guidance and proud to have been recognized in a positive way.

Throughout this whole ordeal, I was encouraged by SGI President Ikeda’s writings. I didn’t feel brave, but I knew I had to endure with courage and integrity.

Eventually, the superintendent of our school district was fired and then jailed for mismanagement. County and state representatives took over. I spoke to them about the many employees who had performed their work with enthusiasm and sincerity. I shared pictures of the schools still in disrepair and requested that the matter receive attention.

Today, I’m a licensed educational consultant. I’m under contract working with teenagers for the city of Inglewood, and I serve on the board of the National Council on Educating Black Children.

I’m very grateful for my Buddhist practice. I meet my challenges with my practice and the great support of SGI-USA members. From a person who held little hope for her future, I’ve become a confident person of faith and integrity.
Fostering Global Citizenship

By Sandra Gualtieri, Italy

In 1989, at the age of 26, I made the decision to enroll at the University of Florence to study education. It was a busy period of studying, working to pay for my studies and being active in SGI activities, which I had begun taking part in three years earlier.

A key motivation for my choice to return to university was the inspiration I received from SGI President Ikeda’s annual peace proposals, and particularly his comments on human rights. Reading the proposals strengthened my conviction that each person influences, for better or for worse, the global situation of our world. I began to feel a strong determination to stand up against injustice. I realized too that the responsibility to protect human rights rests with each of us, and that education is key to developing this awareness.

After graduating from university, I began to search for ways to give practical implementation to the inspiration I received from Mr. Ikeda’s peace proposals. I believe the goal of education is one of transformation, and the role of educators is to help students gain confidence in their innate potential and to become aware of their interrelatedness with the world around them.

The City of Human Rights

Of a number of initiatives for global social development that I learned about, one that particularly appealed to me and which advanced these same values was the Earth Charter Initiative, a grassroots global movement to promote a set of universal values and principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society.

Then, in 2000, SGI-Italy launched a multimedia exhibition called “The City of Human Rights.” I was responsible for contacting schools to promote the exhibition and encouraging the majority of students to participate. The exhibition was shown throughout Italy. In November 2001, 18,000 students visited it in Florence alone.

I also became one of a group of educators within SGI-Italy coordinating interactive Earth Charter Youth Forums for high school students held together with the exhibition. I organized such forums in 10 cities and dedicated myself to facilitating implementation of the wonderful ideas that the young people involved came up with. These forums were aimed at encouraging students to identify solutions to human rights issues and fostering their ability to analyze and make suggestions as active global citizens by “thinking globally and acting locally.” The Earth Charter provided an ideal basis for reflection and discussion—a framework around which to structure the forums. I also developed a system, based on principles of nonviolent education, through which youth participants were able to raise their concerns in “Talk Shows” in front of local politicians and mayors.

Through their experience in the forums students were able to develop not only their awareness of global issues, but also an empowered sense of their own ability to address these problems by taking responsible action in their daily lives.

From 2004, SGI-Italy began to promote these forums in conjunction with a new exhibition, “Seeds of Change.” This exhibition was created by the SGI in collaboration with the Earth Charter Initiative, and focuses specifically on the Earth Charter and the idea of each person’s potential to make a contribution to the positive transformation of their community and the world.

I feel very grateful that through my involvement in these activities I have been able to develop my own sense of agency and responsibility as a global citizen. Carrying out these activities has often required a lot of courage, and this has given birth to a stronger sense of confidence and responsibility, which I now want to share with others. It has also been wonderful to create so many ties of friendship and shared concern with so many people, and I feel a great deal of gratitude for the inspiration of SGI President Ikeda which has encouraged me throughout.
Under Argentina’s military dictatorship (1976–83), 30,000 people were murdered. They were abducted and tortured to death. The students of Tokyo’s Soka University listened transfixed to this gripping testimony by Dr. Adolfo Pérez Esquivel in June 1994. Could such a terrible thing have taken place in this day and age? Even for those who were aware of this tragedy, the words of one who had experienced it were shocking.

“Of course, all 30,000 were not killed at once. They disappeared one or two at a time. Though the number of victims rose to five, ten, one hundred, there was no cry of protest from society. And that is why 30,000 people died.”

A husband, a wife, a child would simply disappear one day. The military authorities were very wily when it came to making people seem to vanish without a trace. Today, when no country can easily afford to ignore international opinion, it is not acceptable to oppress people too conspicuously. But if it can make those it regards as troublemakers simply “disappear” quietly, inconspicuously, a few at a time, the government can easily deny any involvement in the matter. The secret is to rob the protesters of their power to resist, to inflict irreparable damage on them and their cause, however ruthless the means.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Pérez Esquivel has written, “The authorities believed that they held the power of life and death in their hands. . . . Mothers, grandmothers and relatives knocked repeatedly on the doors of the churches, labor union offices, local and central government [asking them to help find their missing loved ones]. But the response was always the same: ‘We have no idea where they are. They must have had a reason to disappear. No doubt they did something wrong.’”

Those missing, the victims, were simply dismissed as criminals, and those who did not know them personally were willing to believe this. Indeed, they were made to believe it. The government manipulated the mass media to drive that message home at every opportunity. Dr. Pérez Esquivel calls this the “shutting down of the conscience.” The people, robbed of the spirit of critical thinking, convinced themselves that the government line was true. Since everyone said those who were missing were criminals, it must be true; there must be a reason for their disappearance. Instead of speaking out from principle and conscience, they decided to remain silent, not to get involved.

But Dr. Pérez Esquivel could not remain silent. He contacted the families of those who had disappeared, and he marched at the front of demonstrations of mothers demanding the return of their loved ones. Already at this time, he was actively campaigning against human rights abuses across Latin America. As a Christian, his beliefs also led him to the conclusion that action was the only path available to him.

In 1977, he was suddenly arrested, without a warrant or a hearing. He was thrown in prison, cast into a world of violent words and violent deeds. There, the false face that the government showed its people was stripped away and its true brutality revealed in its rawest form. His cell was tiny, hardly large enough for him to take even four paces. It was freezing cold. He tried to keep the wind and rain out by covering the missing window panes with old newspaper and slapped himself to keep warm, but sleep was impossible. What’s more, his jailers woke him every two hours.

Their only aim was to destroy the resisters, physically and mentally. One jailer said, “Here you are only a convict. Not even God can help you.” Some prisoners had cigarette burns all over their bodies. Others were left with permanent marks across their faces from blindfolds they were forced to wear for long periods. Many suffered lasting psychological damage. Dr. Pérez Esquivel was subjected to electric-shock torture. During all this, he constantly told himself not to be defeated, resolving to endure and be strong.

At our meeting in Tokyo in December 1995, Dr. Pérez Esquivel said to me, “In prison, I gained the strength to survive under extreme conditions, the strength to resist. That strength is mental and spiritual strength. In prison, one is denied physical freedom. But the mind is free. The mind cannot be imprisoned.”

Sustained by prayer, he endured his prison life. The hardest thing to bear was the sound of others being beaten, their continual cries of pain and anguish. The authorities had no ears for human suffering; they looked on their prisoners as faceless numbers.
How dangerous is a society that has lost all sense of right and wrong.

At every opportunity, Dr. Pérez Esquivel calls out to youth not to be bystanders. He urges them to participate, to become the protagonists in the human drama unfolding around them. He challenges them to become the shapers of history, to have the critical discernment to spot injustices when they happen, to take action and forge support and unity among people.

**Speaking Out**

Social consciousness is important, he says; we must rebel against injustice. How true! When stones are cast at good people, when the rights of honest, hard-working people are trampled, we should be angry! When anyone anywhere around the world discriminates against another, we should burn with indignation! All good people must rage against injustice! Raise your voices! Drown out the loudspeaker lies of the oppressors with a resounding ‘No!’ Nothing suits the authorities better than the apathy of the people, than their feeling of powerlessness and their acceptance of violations of human rights.

“Raise your voices! Drown out the loudspeaker lies of the oppressors with a resounding ‘No!’ Nothing suits the authorities better than the apathy of the people, than their feeling of powerlessness and their acceptance of violations of human rights.”

one stands up for a cause, one exposes oneself to criticism and attack. Knowing this, you still chose to walk the thorny path. What a magnificent life you have led! A life dedicated to fighting oppression shines with golden brilliance.”

In 1980, Dr. Pérez Esquivel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It gave an enormous positive boost to the struggle for human rights around the world. I asked him, “Weren’t the military authorities who had persecuted you the most displeased by your award?” “Most assuredly, yes,” he replied. “They opposed and protested the award more than anyone.” He noted that the Argentine mass media remained silent on the true merit of his activities and the international recognition he had received; if they did write about him, it was to distort the facts.

The day he left Japan, Dr. Pérez Esquivel sent me a message: “When someone I have great faith in is attacked, insulted and persecuted, I will say nothing to him. But when that person ceases to be criticized, then I will express dissatisfaction—because that means he has given up the fight. There is a passage in Cervantes’ classic novel Don Quixote where it is observed that the yapping of dogs is proof that we are proceeding on horseback.”

These are inspiring words indeed, from a committed crusader for justice.

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*Image Description: A large mural in the Argentinian capital Buenos Aires pays tribute mothers and “disappeared” children.*
Three Faiths Community Project

In response to issues facing U.K. society—Islamophobia, polarization between Christianity and Islam and tensions between white and black people—SGI-UK embarked in January of this year on a project that seeks to create friendship based upon dialogue, to facilitate the forging of bonds of trust at the deepest level between people of different faiths.

The Three Faiths Community Project, involving 24 young Muslims, Black Christians and SGI Buddhists from South London aged 18–26, was initiated by the SGI-UK external relations committee and is supported by a grant from the Home Office under its Community Cohesion program. The aim has been to develop a respectful framework in which young people can transcend differences and create a new and dynamic kind of active citizenship.

The participants have met regularly over the past six months in workshops that include reflections on themselves, their backgrounds and the nature of their faith, and frank discussions of stereotypes and assumptions they had about each other. This enabled them to develop joint visions of how to transform their communities, workplaces and colleges.

For the participants it has been a life-changing experience, which has motivated them into organizing a conference on community cohesion in the autumn of this year.

“Getting to know people from different backgrounds and religions helps sever the negative stereotypes and assumptions I had about them,” stated one participant, a Christian woman. A Muslim participant affirmed: “This process enabled me to strengthen my own faith and identity as a Muslim man whilst at the same time reaching out and embracing both Christian and Buddhist traditions. I did not have to compromise or deny myself.” And an SGI participant commented: “What I have learned from this project is community togetherness means being a protagonist and protecting the whole community.”

The minister responsible for Community Cohesion, Parmjit Dhanda MP, invited the group to the Houses of Parliament to discuss the project, exploring their experiences, insights and thoughts on community cohesion.

The final aspect of the project will be a conference organized by the group to open up further discussion on three themes: young people and crime; young people, schooling and education; and community cohesion.

A short DVD is available from David Woodger: d.woodger@gold.ac.uk.

Earthquake Relief Efforts

A massive earthquake struck the Tohoku region of northeastern Japan on June 14, leaving more than 10 people dead and over 440 injured. The Iwate-Miyagi Inland Earthquake destroyed roads and a 95-meter bridge, cutting off isolated village communities in mountainous areas.

On the day of the earthquake, Soka Gakkai youth members from Miyagi set up a relief center and, realizing that sheets, blankets and water would be necessary, distributed more than 50 cases of bottled water to displaced persons. A number of individual Soka Gakkai members also offered what support they could to the victims, such as the owner of an orthopedic clinic who visited relief shelters with his colleagues to provide massages, and others who prepared and distributed food over several days.

In Iwate, an area also struck by the earthquake, Soka Gakkai members who had themselves been affected by the earthquake organized a relief effort to provide water to people, as well as volunteering to cook and wash clothes. One person commented, “Because of the shortage of water, we could not adequately cook and eat. I really appreciate the Soka Gakkai members’ sincere support.”
Over the weekend of June 27–29, the SGI-affiliated Institute of Oriental Philosophy (U.K.), known as NBO, at SGI-UK’s Taplow Court center, on the theme of “The British Buddhist Landscape—Transplantation and Growth.” The conference was originated by IOP (U.K.) Director Jamie Cresswell, who is current chair of NBO.

Around 60 people from different Buddhist groups attended, including lay practitioners, monks, nuns and academics. Speakers presented papers on Buddhism in the U.K. across a broad spectrum of topics, from Buddhism and ethnicity, Buddhist chaplaincy in hospitals and interfaith activities, to talks from four practitioners on how their Buddhist traditions have been received and interpreted in the U.K.

These presentations were on Nepalese Buddhism, Indian Ambedkarite Buddhism, Thai Buddhism and Nichiren Buddhism as practiced within SGI-UK, presented by SGI-UK Vice General Director Kazuo Fuji. In a stimulating closing talk, Dr. John Peacock, guiding teacher at the Sharpham Centre for Contemporary Buddhist Enquiry in Devon, spoke of the need for Buddhists to thoroughly engage with their own time and context.

 Participants were appreciative of the warm welcome given by SGI-UK and the support provided, including the transformation of the Ikeda New Century Hall foyer into a gallery of Buddhist art.
On August 9, SGI-Iceland participated in a gay pride event in Reykjavík, a major annual celebration during Iceland’s week of diversity. Some 40 SGI-Iceland members participated in this event, including six members from SGI’s Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) groups from various European countries, wearing handmade T-shirts with the words “We Cherish Diversity” written on them in Icelandic.

Close to 100,000 people—one-third of Iceland’s population—participated in or attended the parade itself, which has become Iceland’s biggest family festival. As gays and lesbians in Iceland enjoy equal rights, the parade, rather than being a demonstration, is a general celebration of diversity and a stand against all forms of prejudice that is attended by families and children. SGI-Iceland young men’s division representative Haukur Guðmundsson’s interview with Iceland’s national TV station, highlighting SGI’s involvement in the parade, was broadcast on the evening news.

On July 1, more than 125 people attended the opening ceremony for the exhibition “A World Free From Nuclear Weapons Is Possible” at the Lesley University Hall Atrium in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The event was cosponsored by the Peaceable Schools Summer Institute at Lesley University and the City of Cambridge Peace Commission, with the support of local SGI-USA youth.

Kevin Maher, SGI-USA Boston Region young men’s leader, welcomed the gathering of peace activists and explained the SGI’s grassroots activities promoting peace, culture and education.

Steven Leeper, chairman of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, underscored the tremendous urgency of the need to eliminate nuclear weapons, and keynote speaker Natsumi Nagao illuminated this point, as she recounted in graphic detail her personal experience as a young girl burned during the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Stunned by Ms. Nagao’s experience, audience members were stirred to support the “Cities Are Not Targets” petition drive launched by Mayors for Peace.

On June 15, the Hampton John Peters Humphrey Foundation in Hampton, New Brunswick, Canada, held the official unveiling of “CREDO,” a sculpture of John Peters Humphrey, first director of the United Nations Human Rights Division, who was responsible for the first draft of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The sculpture includes life-size figures of Humphrey in his 30s, contemplating the St. John River, and as a child. The event, held on the Hampton Court House lawn, was attended by numerous dignitaries and local townspeople. Louise Meyer represented SGI-Canada, which donated $1,000 to the project. Photographs of Dr. Humphrey and his wife receiving Honorary Doctorates from Soka University are displayed in both the project’s promotional literature and a permanent information platform.
Hiroshima and Nagasaki Peace Activities

On August 5, Soka Gakkai youth division members in Hiroshima, Japan, commemorated the August 6, 1945, atomic bombing of their city with a lecture by Costa Rican Ambassador Mario Fernandez Silva at the Hiroshima Ikeda Peace Memorial Hall. Mr. Fernandez’s address was the 128th lecture in the Hiroshima Lecture Series, which is part of the youth division’s ongoing activities to promote nuclear abolition.

In his address, Mr. Fernandez described Costa Rica’s decision during the drafting of the country’s constitution in 1949 to abolish its military. Currently, one-third of the country’s annual budget goes toward education and medical care. “It is always ordinary citizens who suffer in war,” he said. “The tragedy of the atomic bombing is a lesson for all human beings. I am hoping that Soka Gakkai youth division members will carry out SGI President Ikeda’s ideas on peace and continue to take action.” He told the meeting that the people of Costa Rica share the spirit of Nichiren Buddhism that life is the greatest treasure of all.

On the same day the youth division presented Mr. Fernandez with the Soka Gakkai Hiroshima Peace Award. On August 8, Soka Gakkai youth division members in Nagasaki held a “Peace Forum 2008” seminar at the Nagasaki Peace Center. Ayao Imada, a member of the Nagasaki Association for the Promotion of Peace, delivered a lecture about the effects of militarism on education. Members of the Soka Gakkai Youth Peace Committee highlighted the Japanese government’s recent moves to support the convention banning cluster bombs, and introduced Mr. Ikeda’s calls from his 2008 Peace Proposal for the abolition of these munitions.

From July 3–5, the SGI-Canada Vancouver Youth Earth Charter Committee (YECC) launched a “Summer of Sustainability” campaign at the city’s Central City Shopping Center, distributing a checklist of 50 actions people can take to engage with others in the community and reduce their carbon footprint—the direct effect one’s actions and lifestyle have on the environment in terms of carbon dioxide emissions.

The effort built upon the success of a “30 Days of Sustainability” campaign held by SGI-Canada members in Greater Vancouver between September and December 2007. For 30 days during that period, members were encouraged to find ways to build their awareness of sustainability in their own daily lives and take action to reduce their environmental impact. The committee created a checklist of simple actions using the Earth Charter as a framework. Individuals could, for example, host a local discussion meeting on the interconnectedness of life and how it relates to their consumption patterns, or take more concrete actions including installing energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs, carpooling, cycling to work or writing to their local politicians about sustainability.

At the launch of the “Summer of Sustainability” campaign, YECC founding member Richard Chu commented, “Environmental problems can’t be dealt with as an isolated issue. As SGI President Ikeda noted in his 2002 proposal on education for sustainable development, sustainability is about more than just the environment. There are also social, economic, community and even political dimensions. We hope to build awareness of this more comprehensive view of sustainability.”

In the town of Alton in Ontario, meanwhile, SGI-Canada youth members from the Toronto area, together with the Credit Valley Conservation Authority (CVC), participated in an annual tree planting on June 7, planting 85 trees to provide shade and protection to the river and surrounding flora. The youth members transported gardening equipment and plants across the river via a “human chain.”

SGI-Canada has been an active CVC community partner since 2000, and the organization’s youth have helped plant 3,000 trees to date.
Marcy Newman, from Canada, is a licensed Practical Nurse who has worked for 34 years in a variety of departments. For the past three years she has worked on an HIV ward in a hospital in Vancouver where many of her patients are drug addicts and homeless people. Pedro Soares, from Portugal, has 11 years of nursing experience in elderly care and palliative care, which concentrates on relieving suffering for people facing serious illness rather than striving to halt or reverse the progression of the disease. He currently works in a cancer center in Lisbon.

What are the keys to being a good nurse? How do you strive to develop your own capacity in this regard?

**Pedro Soares:** It’s important to study in order to develop one’s human and technical skills, but that study should be motivated by a desire to value and respect each person, regardless of their health condition: nursing is not about accumulating knowledge which, in practical terms, may not have a significant impact on the well-being of the patient.

**Marcy Newman:** After many years of working I look back and admire many fellow nurses who are so kind, considerate and empathetic to their patients. Listening to patients is also a characteristic of a good nurse. My Buddhist practice has helped me naturally develop all of these characteristics.

What is the most challenging aspect of your work?

**Pedro:** It’s a great challenge to keep motivated and confident in order to always feel hopeful and transmit hope and encouragement to the patients and their families. Another challenge is to work in a team that, traditionally, is focused mainly on the activity of doctors. I’m currently part of a multidisciplinary project that unites doctors, nurses, social workers and psychologists, and that has as its goal to galvanize the joint efforts of these teams so as to achieve the most effective treatment for the patients and their families. I must say that it’s very fulfilling when I’m able to establish a relationship of genuine empathy amongst doctors, nurses and patients.

**Marcy:** The most challenging part of my job is that our society hasn’t figured out how to help people overcome addiction. Therefore, as nurses we are trying to treat one of many AIDS-related illnesses while patients continually sabotage their own care by leaving and using drugs. It’s like putting a band-aid on the carotid artery.

What were your reasons for entering the nursing profession?

**Marcy:** Empathy for friends who were sick in hospital when I was in high school drew me to visit them. Because of this I decided that maybe I would be a good nurse.

**Pedro:** It was never a vocational thing or childhood dream. My mother was a nurse, and I was well aware of the physical and mental toll that this job entails, so I didn’t have a good impression of this job nor the desire to do it.

At the end of high school, I was going through a period of indecision regarding my professional future when a friend invited me to volunteer at a big hospital in Lisbon, Portugal’s capital. I can’t explain why I accepted the invitation, but I went, and after that experience I had a strong desire to work in the health-care field. That’s...
how I started on the path of being a nurse. How has the philosophy of Buddhism, particularly its perspectives on the nature of life and death, influenced your approach to your work?

**Marcy:** Learning the Buddhist perspective on life and death has encouraged me to never take life for granted. When I know that death is imminent, I try to find time alone with the person and connect with them heart to heart.

**Pedro:** My Buddhist practice helps keep me resilient and able to support patients and their families who are confronting complex and difficult situations. Buddhism has also inspired me to delve deeper into the questions of life and to strive to understand these issues with my life, rather than just in terms of intellectual concepts. I feel it’s given me a deeper understanding of life. I have gradually come to feel that the life of the individual coexists with the universe, and this is a reassuring thought. I have learned to stop running from death and suffering.

I have also become less pessimistic at work, and I’m no longer defeated by feelings of despair and a desire to escape.

How important is it to enable patients to feel their dignity and sense of self even in situations where they are very helpless? How do you try to do this?

**Pedro:** I focus on embracing and supporting patients, and not giving in to despair. I am often overcome with fear and feelings of impotence, especially when facing the most extreme cases, but I don’t want to imagine how things would be if I gave up. Therefore, I continue to try to do my best with a feeling of joy and hope.

**Marcy:** When patients are helpless, I think the best way to help them keep their dignity and sense of self is to let them know that I am an advocate for them by listening to them and communicating their wishes to the rest of the team. I try to become their voice for them.

How do you stay positive when surrounded by people who are seriously ill?

**Marcy:** My Buddhist practice has made it natural for me to be positive regardless of the situation. Most often I find it more difficult to stay positive around other nurses who are negative and have lost their empathy or compassion for others.

**Pedro:** My Buddhist practice is very important in helping me keep my conviction intact and keep conscious, competent and compassionate.

“People who are sick always have to deal with inner turmoil of some kind. They carry on a painful inner dialogue with themselves about their illness, posing questions that they then try to answer. Just by listening to a sick person articulate this inner conflict and pain, we can relieve some of his or her suffering . . . There is no one who is a stranger to sickness. Only when society extends the warm spirit of nursing to all will we have a healthy society.”

—From SGI President Ikeda’s dialogues with members of the Soka Gakkai nurses group.
If we view the overall flow of the Lotus Sutra, we see that the first portion of the sutra, starting with the “Introduction” chapter and ending with the tenth chapter, is set on Eagle Peak [Mount Gridhrakuta, outside the present-day city of Rajgir in India] where Shakyamuni Buddha preaches to a great assembly. In the eleventh chapter an enormous tower suddenly rises up out of the earth and floats into the air, and the Buddha uses his supernatural powers to lift the entire assembly up into the air. This portion of the sutra is accordingly known as the Ceremony in the Air. With the twenty-third chapter, the scene returns to Eagle Peak.

This makes three assemblies: the first assembly on Eagle Peak, the Ceremony in the Air, and the second assembly on Eagle Peak. The overall action of the sutra is therefore referred to as “three assemblies in two places.”

Eagle Peak is an actual spot in India where Shakyamuni preached. But the Ceremony in the Air section of the sutra clearly transcends reality. It is a representation of the vast and unbounded state of the Buddha, the state of enlightenment. This is a realm of ultimate reality and truth that transcends both time and space. I believe that the relationship between the two assemblies on Eagle Peak and the Ceremony in the Air has a profound significance in terms of a life philosophy. The progression from Eagle Peak to the “air” and then back to Eagle Peak represents a flow from reality prior to enlightenment, to the state of enlightenment, and then to reality after enlightenment. In other words, we cut the chains that bind us to the earth of reality in order to reach the lofty skies of enlightenment from where we can gaze serenely on all things. The subsequent progression from the Ceremony in the Air back to Eagle Peak represents the act of returning to daily life and society and facing its challenges. Reality becomes the means of demonstrating our Buddhahood.

In life, we must not permit ourselves to be totally absorbed with immediate realities only. We must have ideals and strive to achieve them, thereby transcending present realities. On the other hand, we must not allow ourselves to become alienated from immediate realities. We can change nothing unless our feet are firmly planted on the ground.

Many people, and many religions as well, tend to choose one of two paths. Either they compromise with the realities of society and lose their identity, or, in seeking to evade these realities, they remove themselves entirely from society and try to create their own separate world. Both approaches are mistaken. The Lotus Sutra teaches a way of life in which we gaze serenely upon realities from an elevated state of life—high above in the air, as it were—and yet, at the same time, actively involve ourselves in those realities as reformers.

This same progression through “three assemblies in two places” can, when viewed from a slightly different angle, be taken to symbolize the differences of emphasis between Shakyamuni’s teachings and Nichiren’s teachings.

Shakyamuni’s teachings, we may say, emphasize the movement from Eagle Peak to the Ceremony in the Air—in other words, leaving this world in search of the realm of the Buddha’s wisdom. Nichiren’s Buddhism stresses the progression from enlightenment back to the world of everyday realities. It aims for the transformation of reality.

The “three assemblies in two places” also expresses the oneness of life and death. If the Ceremony in the Air represents the state of our existence after death, then Eagle Peak represents life. The “three assemblies in two places” thus represents the dynamic movement from life to death and to life again. It reveals the true entity of life and death as one inseparable phenomenon.

The important thing is that we act out the “three assemblies in two places” in our daily lives. Each moment, each day, has an eternity of value enfolded in it. The more time passes, the more each moment, each day, shines with a golden light. The Lotus Sutra teaches this unsurpassed way of living.

Nichiren’s Buddhism stresses the progression from enlightenment back to the world of everyday realities. It aims for the transformation of reality.
Brazil Celebrates 100 Years of Japanese Immigration

An official event celebrating the centennial of Japanese immigration to Brazil took place in São Paulo’s Anhembi Arena, a 500-meter samba parade ground, on June 21. Some 500 SGI-Brazil (BSGI) youth performed for the audience of 30,000. BSGI performances included a fife-and-drum corps, brass bands, a dance group and an orchestra. One highlight of the performance was a gymnastic display put on by some 200 BSGI youth and their friends. Guest attendees included Japan’s Crown Prince Hironomiya, Brazil’s Vice President José Alencar and Paraná Governor Roberto Requião.
The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a worldwide association of 82 constituent organizations with membership in 192 countries and territories. In the service of its members and of society at large, the SGI centers its activities on developing positive human potentialities for hope, courage and altruistic action.

Rooted in the life-affirming philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, members of the SGI share a commitment to the promotion of peace, culture and education. The scope and nature of the activities conducted in each country vary in accordance with the culture and characteristics of that society. They all grow, however, from a shared understanding of the inseparable linkages that exist between individual happiness and the peace and development of all humanity.

As a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with formal ties to the United Nations, the SGI is active in the fields of humanitarian relief and public education, with a focus on peace, sustainable development and human rights.