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Strategies for achieving peace

How to ensure positive interactions amongst cultures and amongst religions

"SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT." PSALMS 34: 15

The Prerequisites for Achieving Peace

1. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

In order to live at peace with the "Other," I need first to live at peace with and in myself. Thus I must know who I am, what is my identity. What traditions – familial, local and national – have shaped my identity, my beliefs and my values? What events – personal, national, regional, universal – have contributed to the process of developing my identity and my *Weltanschauung*. So far as the traditions are concerned, do I define myself as unquestioningly perpetuating them, as almost equally unquestioningly defying them or as one who examines closely which of the traditions and conventions – of thought and behaviour – are still relevant?

To have a sense of my own identity demands autonomy: independence, freedom of thought, speech and action, freedom from fear of censure or punishment should my own opinions and beliefs not accord with those of the majority or of those who govern. Self-respect, self-esteem, are essential, not only in order to merit respect from others but also, equally so, as a basis for respecting these others.

Yet an unquestioning, unthinking, automatic and obstinate adherence even to those views and values at which I have arrived through my own critical awareness may well prove an obstacle to making and living in peace. One must be prepared to *listen*, to learn and, if necessary, to revise or modify one's views, change one's course of action, in

the light of new knowledge, scientific or otherwise, or unforeseen historical events. (Examples of such change or resistance to change are to be found in the realm of politics, e.g. the awakening from a Communist "dream" experienced by many during the 1950s and 1960s or the persistent adherence to Creationism in the face of evolutionary theory.)

2. "If I am [only] for myself, what am I?"

Centering on and knowing oneself, however essential, is not in itself enough to serve as a basis for living in peace with others. To achieve co-existence and collaboration, we need to find a balance between self-respect, self-love, and love of our neighbours.

Respect for the Other implies a readiness to open our hearts and minds, to listen. Listening leads to understanding, understanding to empathy, the essential ability to put oneself in the place of the Other and view the world from the Other's perspective. This is a process that engenders compassion, which in turn may and should induce caring; caring in the sense of "caring about" (being concerned with), but also in that of "caring for" (a) offering help, in whatever form such help is appropriate, whether emotional, psychological or material; b) feeling of liking or affection. Putting oneself in the shoes of the Other, where that Other is an opponent or even an enemy, frequently leads to a healthy degree of self-criticism, which may even lead to a substantial change in our attitude and/or behaviour towards that Other.

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The Means

How can we ensure the inculcation and development of the above prerequisites?
As an educator by inclination and profession since I attained adulthood, I am a firm believer in education as a means for enabling the individual to develop precisely those characteristics and qualities which I have posited as essential for attaining peaceful coexistence on all levels and in every sphere of our lives. I do not limit my definition of education to that which may be derived from formal frameworks such as school or

university. Rather, education, like charity, begins at home, since the home is a microcosm of society, at once incorporating and reflecting social values and forming them. As parents (and teachers) we convey moral values as much, if not more than, via our own behaviour rather than by theorizing or preaching. Precepts are of little avail if they are not put into practice. A cruel, punitive parent or teacher will not teach a child to respect or love others. In fact, practice is infinitely more effective than precept where education and upbringing are concerned. Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, older siblings can all be important role models. This has been borne in on me over the past twenty years or so by my frequent encounters with groups of young women in leadership training courses. When asked which individual has inspired them to emulation, they have with increasing frequency referred to their mothers or grandmothers (many of them neo-feminist participants in, or products of, the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s), rather than to some world-famous personality, which was the case some twenty to twenty-five years ago. We adults are often unaware of the degree of influence we exert, for good or for bad.

The relationship between parents and between them and their children is of primary importance in modeling unconditional love and caring, in inculcating a sense of security and self-confidence. On the other hand, paradoxically perhaps, violence generally engenders violence. Disrespect undermines precisely that sense of self- worth which is a basis for respecting others. A child that is not only talked to (though that too is important) but also listened to, a child to whom parents explain why they request or expect certain behaviour, is far more likely to act according to family expectations, needs or practices. Reasoning, rather than compulsion, is more likely to ensure the continuation and reinforcement of affection and compliance.

Similarly, the relationship between parents which a child witnesses in the home serves as a model for his/her own behaviour towards parents and siblings. Where there are mutual respect, visible displays of affection and mutual appreciation, generosity of spirit, equal sharing of responsibilities in and outside the home, acknowledgment of the contribution made by both spouses and by their offspring, peace is more likely to reign.

Significantly, in Hebrew the words for "parent" and "teacher" share a common etymological root. A school or any formal educational framework can and should model

mutual respect and other moral values. From personal experience as a school principal, I have concluded that this is best done by running the school on democratic principles, ensuring maximal involvement of the pupils in determination of policy and in decision making of every kind and on any aspect of the learning environment, its principles and its practices. A school parliament, with clear rules of debate and voting, enabled the pupils and staff at my school to see themselves as full partners in curricular and extra-curricular aspects of the institution. The establishment (by common consensus) of a "court" composed of pupils and staff appointed or elected in rotation, to which those who infringed rules might be summoned or before which a pupil or staff member could lodge a complaint inculcated both responsibility and an awareness of the importance of justice. To my mind, the best way of learning is by doing. (cf. "I hear, I forget; I see, I remember; I do, I understand.")

In terms of cognitive development, schools are of course vital instruments in developing the kind of knowledge and critical faculties that I referred to earlier – of history, geography, cultures, beliefs and traditions – all of which help the individual to develop a sense of his/her own identity. What better than the great classics of world literature to help us grapple with universal existential and moral issues of good and evil, truth and falsehood, forgiveness and reconciliation as opposed to vindictiveness and revenge … the ultimate theories of any age – the formation of self through attachment and loss, the hunger for love and meaning, the unacceptable truth of extinction by death? *Crime and Punishment*, *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, as well as the Book of Genesis, spring to mind, at least among those of us who have been brought up on Western culture. Doubtless other cultures can contribute further examples. Great literature develops our awareness of the complexity of human psychology, enhances moral vision, broadens our sympathies and deepens our capacity for compassion. And indeed in a world increasingly characterised by multiculturalism and pluralities it is essential that schools respect the variety of backgrounds that exist among their pupils.

Some thirty years ago, I found such an approach admirably exemplified in an elementary school in an economically deprived neighbourhood in Bradford, an industrial city in Northeast England that has absorbed a high number of immigrants from a wide range of countries. At the beginning of the school day a joyous pealing of bells

summoned the pupils to the assembly hall, where they were greeted by soothing Gregorian chanting. Devotions were brief: in unison, the children recited the Lord's Prayer (a uniquely ecumenical text which, to my mind, contains nothing that should offend a non-Christian monotheist); they sang a very beautiful two-part setting of Psalm 23 (Brother James's Air); the motherly headmistress said a few sentences about the virtue of honesty and then described a new project – the planting of a vegetable garden in the school grounds – on which the pupils were about to embark. And then, to the sound of Indian music, the pupils dispersed to their classes. I was, by the way, told that the headmistress chooses stories from different religious traditions to read during this prayer session, so that the pupils, themselves very diversified in terms of religious affiliation, would already early in their lives become acquainted with traditions other than their own. They would be exposed to the existence of a variety of religious beliefs and customs and to the awareness that each religion has its unique form of communing with a superhuman spiritual force common to all humankind. Secondly, this fact was being conveyed to them in a warm, loving, harmonious setting, where the figures of authority – the entire staff – aroused respect and affection, not fear. There was little preaching, but much practice of precisely those principles which the teachers wished to inculcate in their pupils. In other words, the entire educational environment embodied a concept of mutual acquaintance, acceptance and equal legitimacy. No one belief or practice was privileged or presented as superior to the others and what was stressed, amid the diversity, was what was common to all – our humanity. The model here was not that of the melting pot, but rather of a *mosaic*.

In accord with this principle of flexibility, openness and variety, classes were conducted in a very large space, in which learning groups (some of mixed age), some with more than one teacher) were separated from each other by moveable screens which could be adjusted to groups of varying sizes. What struck an observer was how happy the children seemed to be, how apparently unstructured the learning, how warmly the teachers related to their pupils. Appreciation of especially good behaviour (not academic achievement) was expressed by bins full of gauze "angel's wings" which were bestowed in the course of the day on those who merited them by performing some special deed of "caring."

This “caring,” which Nell Noddings has in her works presented as an essential human quality that a school can and should inculcate, can be encouraged not only by planting and tending a garden, but also by keeping pets in the school. It can be extended further to include peer coaching in which pupils who have attained advanced proficiency help those who are at a less advanced level. In addition, a school project of outreach to deprived populations in their own or neighboring districts makes pupils aware of social needs and encourages the individual to participate in tending to those needs. (My own school had a course on Israeli society, which consisted *inter alia* of both theoretical study of social issues and practical work devoted to dealing with examples of social problems.) Similar life studies can teach the skills of dialogue and civilized debate.

Team-teaching, for which two or more teachers, from different disciplines, who also (ideally) differ in their social and ethnic background and/or religious affiliation, deal with a specific topic, time period etc., each from his/her perspective, is in itself a model of collaboration, cooperation and integration. Intellectually, conceptually, it develops the important ability to appreciate and comprehend not only the individual “trees” of knowledge and culture, but the entire forest, not only the separate limbs but the entire body – and hence perhaps also the *soul*, the essence.

Education is of primary importance in inculcating a culture of mutuality. No individual should be expected to abandon his own or her own belief and values or those of their families and communities, but rather to realise and respect the fact that there are other beliefs. And this same message of, on the one hand, helping the individual to define, recognize and respect his/her own tradition while also developing awareness and respect for others, can and should be conveyed not only in schools but by a variety of frameworks and methods: clubs, community centers, youth movements, culture and media – art, music, literature; above all, the mass electronic media which both young and old are now constantly exposed to and influenced by.

Formal education requires that educators develop and utilise curricula, textbooks and other teaching tools that further the aims of interculturalism. This in turn requires a more global, less chauvinist, less self-centered, less solipsistic approach – study of the history of civilization, world geography, the life sciences, environmental studies, and languages – although at some points there clearly needs to be a focus on what is unique to

the pupils' own cultural background. (From the particular to the general and vice versa, a series of constant comparisons.)

Exposure to other cultures and traditions, coupled with clarification and inculcation of knowledge of, and respect and love for, one's own native traditions, of necessity creates a tension between loyalty to one's own culture and respect for that of others. One needs to find a balance between the two, so that the individual's sense of security derived from affiliation and belonging is not undermined.

Direct encounters with people of other and different cultures and beliefs, through organized exchanges of visits and joint activities, help to dispel stereotypes and counter preconceptions and prejudices. (Thus, for example, when teenage pupils from my school for religious Jewish girls met pupils from a comparable Palestinian school whose pupils included both Muslims and Christians, they were all taken aback to find how distorted their images of each other were, how far from the truth. Apart from the intrinsic interest of these encounters, the pupils found numerous similarities which made reconciliation seem more feasible than before, when there has been mutual ignorance.)

Encounters not only with peer groups but with individuals who have made significant contributions to society can also be inspiring and stimulate emulation. I refer to "great" human beings, who are not necessarily famous, but who have displayed courage, initiative, persistence in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles: Holocaust survivors, founders of NGOs, civil rights activists, etc. – those who have dared to challenge prejudice and received opinion. No less heroic than many of the historical figures who are usually referred to in history lessons, they teach us the importance of civil society and the contribution that each of us can make to create such societies.

The mass media, and most especially the electronic media, have great potential in education, because they facilitate distance learning and can bring us closer to other climes and other cultures, even enabling dialogue between people who are physically (and probably also culturally) far removed from each other. They can create programs and projects that develop both intracultural and intercultural acquaintance and understanding.

And so to the body politic.

Nothing can make amends for a lack of respect for the individual, for his or her opinions and beliefs, for disregard of human dignity, nor compensate for the absence of

freedom of speech and freedom of movement, the right to self-fulfillment so long as it is not at the expense of others – those elements which characterize a true, liberal democracy. Equality before the law, equality of opportunity in education and employment, must be accompanied by a facilitation of individual and collective participation in determining public policy and decision-making at all levels, from the family and home, through schooling and employment, to the state at large (including religious establishments, where relevant). In other words, no individual may be excluded from these processes on grounds of ethnicity, class or gender.

There can be neither true justice nor peace so long as there are inequities in society. So long as some ethnic groups are considered as inferior and treated as such, so long as one religion is privileged above another, so long as men rule and women are subordinate, we cannot claim to have achieved either peace or justice. Female foeticide, genital mutilation, wife-beating, child marriages, bride money, enforced pregnancies resulting from denial of birth control, enforced celibacy, condemnation or prohibition of divorce from an unsuitable or violent partner, homophobia, denial of education – all these deep engrained attitudes, practices and customs – many of them condoned or even mandated by religious authorities – have to be eradicated.

It is not by chance that so many of the laws, practices, and customs that need to be radically corrected or even abolished, relate to women. In virtually every religion and in far too numerous societies women are the excluded, the oppressed, the underlings, the "woodcutters and water-carriers." Their exclusion is sometimes portrayed as benevolent exemption from certain obligations, but it in fact reinforces inferiority and inequality. Some religions deny equal inheritance rights and we have to remember that that there are still many countries – and their number is, unfortunately, rising rather than declining – in which religious law, laid down and interpreted almost exclusively by *male* religious leaders, is the law of the land.

Clearly, there needs to be radical change, especially as far as women's rights are concerned. Fortunately, neo-feminism has brought about a significant change in education, professional life, and politics: there are now hundreds of thousands, even many millions, of women who have received higher education – often hard-won; there are increasing numbers of women lawyers, doctors, businesswomen, CEOs; and women

have even penetrated – though not yet in sufficient numbers – into the hurly-burly of politics and parliamentary government.

In the more liberal streams of even originally extreme patriarchal religions, women have taken upon themselves the same degree of study of religious texts as was mandatory for men, and this new-found expertise has enabled them to read religious texts and to interpret them from a less misogynist perspective; they have developed new rituals that mark or celebrate women's life-cycle and experience, such as birthing, menstruation, menopause. Frequently beginning with the search for the "separate but equal" model, in many cases they move towards significantly transforming hitherto male-dominated spheres into more egalitarian space and practices.

There are still too many vital spheres of our lives in which women's voices are stifled. For example, it has been shown that there are considerable and important gender differences in peace-directed dialogue. In women-only dialogues there was a presence of emotion lacking in male-only or mixed dialogue. Women throughout the centuries – the childbearers, nurturers and "carers" of the world, tend towards conciliation and compromise rather than confrontation and conflict. Women begin from the point of shared experience of oppression, of loss of male kinfolk. They tend to have more social elements – formal talk, even singing and dancing. They seek less structure, a more free-flowing approach. They express sympathy and sensitivity to suffering, loss of life, violence. For them, the personal is political – but also *vice versa*. Significantly, the UN has recognised the importance of incorporating women in all aspects of government (Resolution 1325).

It will require the collaboration of male religious and political leaders to bring about truly radical change: courageous leaders, prepared to pioneer vitally needed and major cultural changes – leaders prepared to critically scrutinize the *mores* of their society and religion and to amend them in the light of changing conditions and norms. In Judaism there is a concept, propounded by the great Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook – to renew the old and to sanctify the new, to pay due respect to tradition, but also to welcome the progress which results from changing social norms. And that is a process that every religion should engage in.

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3. "And if not now, when?"

This is the major challenge that faces you, us. How do we go about prompting and inspiring a process of profound change, a transformation, a transfiguration? How shall we harness the innumerable means now at our disposal in our globalised world – the mass media, the instant communication systems – to further not only literacy and numeracy, but also moral values, tolerance, mutual understanding? What will be our message? Will it be one of hatred and incitement against the "other," the alien, the different? Or will it be one of opening the mind and the heart in order to understand and embrace the other? How shall we reconcile the individual's needs for autonomy and independence with the needs of society at large?

To achieve the kind of society of which so many of us dream and to which we aspire, for which we strive, we need a new and better type of *leadership*: women and men leaders who, like good educators, will inspire others to contribute maximally to the common good, rather than to focus all their energies on individual material gain. Leaders who will themselves be models and mentors. Leaders at every level, at every stage of individual and social development – local, regional, national and international, political leaders and religious leaders. And while leaders are, on the whole, born with certain innate qualities, there is not doubt that leaders can and must also be trained, if they are to lead their disciples, their followers, their "flock," their brothers and sisters, their colleagues and companions in the human enterprise. Leadership-training courses, conducted by experts who can also serve as role models and mentors, have been found to be extremely effective.

"Love your fellow human as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18) "We must love one another or die," W. H. Auden famously stated. Yet one must admit that love cannot be compelled. What can and must be taught, encouraged, practised is *respect*. The fifth commandment given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai realistically bids us to "honour" our parents. Given the hatred, the violence, the warfare that currently dominate so many parts of the world, perhaps that is the most we can at present hope for; respect, tolerance and understanding, all of which facilitate peaceful coexistence, may also ultimately breed love.

We who are gathered here, women and men, adherents to different faiths, citizens of different states, are making a start – or continuing a process – of confronting the challenges of our time. May we be granted steadfastness of purpose, wisdom, and strength of mind, spirit and body to continue on our path and, we must pray, to take steps toward our common goal. As the *Ethics of the Fathers* teaches us: It is not for you to complete the task, but neither may you desist from it.