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Dialogue among Civilizations

The present mirrors the history in a way that one could have insight into the future. When George Orwell envisioned his dystopia '1984', he predicted the destiny of humanity. He touched upon ethical, social and political issues, providing a somewhat terrifying end for man. As humanity is driven by the two poles of love and hate and steered by the powers of good and evil, present events won't cease to resemble past events. '1984' is as Erich Fromm¹ described, an expression of a mood and a warning. The mood it expresses is that of near despair about the future of man. And the warning is that unless the course of history changes, human will cause their own termination. Some might say Orwell negatively depicted the future of mankind, I say such a future is not far from happening, if humanity continues on its present path.

Happiness, justice and peace have always been the goal of human beings. All religions embody such attainment as major principles in their beliefs. The concepts of heaven, kingdom of God, Nirvana and yet other, all symbolize an environment of optimum bliss, where humans live in harmony, away from conflict and pain. Such a goal is also present in the concept of 'Utopia' in social and political ideologies. It can be concluded that such striving utopian aspirations, are all part of human nature. Human nature, intriguing in its psychology, pens the history of man where individuals of great charismata choose how it is penned, either constructively or destructively. Thus comes the importance of know human nature's inclinations.

One of the psychological manifestations of human nature is the concept of war. Sociology tells of human tending to form in groups to find their recognition and identity. The group holding different values from the other tend to consider the latter as its opponent, consequently strengthening the homogeneity of the former group. This 'group' can mean a religious, country, culture or –even more broadly – a civilization. As Huntington says "People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not often only when we know whom we are against."² Orwell realizes that and puts it as one of three brainwashing slogans of the party: war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength.³

'Ignorance is strength' statement indicates the extent a nation can succumb to blindness from truth, when lacking knowledge. However, such knowledge should not be affected by emotions. Nietzsche said "The more abstract the truth is that you would teach, the more you have to seduce the senses to it."⁴ Nietzsche's 'abstract truth' is incomplete knowledge in whatever grouping, such as religion, race or culture. These groupings sometimes obscure reality through emotion-based knowledge. This obscurity is brought about through fanaticism where history documents its devastating effects. That is when objectivity can be a savior to conflict.

As human beings we cannot diminish our feelings of injustice and hostility to the oppressor, but as knowledgeable human beings we should be objective and fair. Former U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld recognized the power of objectivity in resolving disputes. “You can only hope to find a lasting solution to a conflict, if you have learned to see the other objectively, but, at the same time, to experience his difficulties subjectively.”⁵ Therefore, dialogue is vital in conflict resolution.

One may wonder why great emphasis was given to the necessity of dialogue among civilizations throughout the last two decades. Well, in addition to the vicious cycles of history and human nature, there is the “Cultural conflicts,” that as Vaclav Havel has observed, “are increasing and are more dangerous today than at any time in history.”⁶ Nowadays, nations tend to cling to their heritage and take pride in their cultures, as a reaction to the recent globalization. Such a reaction may result in conflicts, as Jacques Delors mentioned, “future conflicts will be sparked by cultural factors rather than economics or ideology.”⁷ Another major concern is the environment. Since all civilizations are under the same umbrella of environmental issues, dialogue is a necessity.

The concept of a civilization is culture writ large. According to Huntington, the major contemporary civilizations are the Far Eastern, the Islamic, the Orthodox, Latin American, the Western and the African.⁸ The clash of these civilizations – broadly grouped – is based on cultural factors. Living in the Islamic civilization, I feel the threat of the Western civilization in its values of individualism, renouncement of societal habits and enhancement of personal freedom. The Western civilization carries the motto of globalization, therefore, intending to dilute cultures into a universal civilization. Huntington offers the steps through which productive interaction among civilizations can take place, he says “in a multi-civilizational world, the constructive course is to renounce universalism, accept diversity, and seek commonalities.”⁹ For that, history provides successful evidence in the White Paper that defined the “Shared Values” of Singaporeans.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the engagement of the people themselves is as vital – if not more – as the engagement of governments in the process of dialogue. Art, sports and the media are powerful transmitters of mutual understanding and cultural exchange. No matter how many prejudices one has, one can’t help but watch the Olympics where civilizations adhere to dialogue, subduing to the clean beauty of sport. And no matter what nationality one bears, art diminishes borders reaching out to the raw objective self. This is when our role as the young generation is modified.

Our role as the young generation is to bear witness for truth, once we recognize an injustice in our world, that knowledge becomes part of us. We can no longer turn away ignorance. As the mass media transforms the planet into a global village, witnessing becomes a powerful force for change. Newspapers, radio, television and the Internet connect us all in a planetary network, an interlocking web of consciousness. Another way to spread awareness is through educational organizations, such as the United World

Colleges, constitution by con-governmental organizations operating with UNESCO. Such places father international students from all cultures serving to better prepare the youth.

Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed. That ignorance of each other's ways and lives has ignited, throughout the history of mankind, suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world, through which their differences have all too often broken into war. Peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace that could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere engagement of civilizations of the world. Peace and mutual understanding must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, on the intellectual and mental solidarity of mankind. God says in the Koran "We made you into peoples and tribes to get to know each other, so only the good hearted are closest to Allah."¹¹ It is up to us as youth to act upon the objective truth good heartedly, where acknowledging, understanding and exchanging processes pave harmony among civilizations.

¹ George Orwell, "1984", New York, USA, Penguin Group, 1961, afterword, p. 257.

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", New York, USA, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997. p. 21

³ George Orwell, "1984", New York, USA, Penguin Group, 1961, p.7

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil", translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York, USA, Random House Inc., 1989, p.87

⁵ Dag Hammarskjold, "Markings", (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.; London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1965, p. 114

⁶ Vaclav Havel, "The New Measure of Man", New York Times, 8 July 1994, p. A27

⁷ Jacques Delors, "Questions Concerning European Security", Address, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Brussels, 10 September 1993, p. 2

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", New York, USA, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997, p. 45-47

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", New York, USA, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997, p. 318.

¹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", New York, USA, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997, p. 319

¹¹ The Holy Koran, surat Al-Hujurat, verse (13).