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Dialogue in a Digital World

Along a dirt road in Sudan, a Muslim woman breast-fed her baby. As Bisi nursed her child, a group of emaciated Christian women crept out of the brush, carrying little bundles. Bisi pulled her child close as they approached. A woman opened her bundle and Bisi gasped as she stared at a starving infant. Bisi laid her child on the grass. She reached out to one of the Christians and brought the other woman's baby to her breast, reflecting only momentarily on her cultural belief that nursing another woman's child would poison her milk.

I met Bisi at the Beijing Plus Five Special Session of the United Nations on Women, where I learned that she now operates a cross community women's center in Sudan. Her work with cross community coalitions gives me hope for peace in areas of deep ethnic conflict. Her leadership in cross community dialogues inspired me to join together with other youth and create the "One Nation" discussion forum. We are an e-mail collective with members from all around the globe. We are Nigerians, Egyptians, Moldovans, Albanians, Germans, Americans, Norwegians, Canadians, French, Italians, Australians, Indians, Russians, Malaysians, Algerians, Jordanians, and Iranians. We believe in the power of dialogue in promoting inter-cultural understanding. We believe that dialogue among youth will promote peace in the future.

An unthinkable act of terror rocked the United States and the world on September 11, 2001. Although the United States is at war against terrorism and not a civilization, it seems that Samuel Huntington's famous fault lines are erupting. In Northern Ireland and Israel tensions are rising – the peace processes are failing. Yet, there is hope for peace in the future. There is hope in our "One Nation Group" and there is hope because of dialogue initiated by people like Bisi.

September 11 is a call to action for the world's youth. Hate should be unacceptable in our local communities. Student leaders should form coalitions against hate. Dialogue should take place in every classroom. Youth should embody the spirit of the United Nations Year of Dialogue now more than ever. The message of dialogue and respect for human rights, inclusiveness, and equality should be carried through young people. The message may be transmitted globally through the Internet. Technology can help us create dialogue networks. A world where global understanding predominates is possible.

World Scenario: Imagine that it is the year 2020...

Internet use has spread from developed to less developed nations. While access to the Internet became universal in most developed countries in 2010, the digital divide effected the third world. Through international dialogue and funding resulting from a 2010 United Nations World Conference on Technological and Development Equality, by 2020, Internet access has become

common in the third world. Global dialogue is taking place on-line. Digital dialogue is shaping international relations, community understanding, education, and business. Dialogue is resolving conflict through connecting the youth of the world. Cyber identities do not replace but exist parallel to traditional national and ethnic identities. Cyber societies connect people of all ages regardless of ethnic background. People are learning to understand and accept other cultures. Please step with me into the year 2020 and take a glimpse of the world that young leaders of today could shape for the children of tomorrow.

In 2020, some community dialogue is face-to-face. It is personal and is vital to peace. Following the United Nations Year of Global Dialogue, international resources were directed to support dialogue groups and the results...

In Northern Ireland, Protestants are still British, and Catholics are still Irish, but paramilitary flags are not flying. Where have the Ulster Volunteer Force flags gone? After failed negotiations in 2001 surrounding paramilitary disarmament, there was fear that ethnic violence might again take hold of the political process. Community dialogue and especially, youth dialogue prevented a return to wide spread violence. The groups began with young leaders who were called idealistic. They wanted change and were able to achieve a level of harmony that political leaders have only dreamed of through persistently promoting dialogue.

Since the year of global dialogue, travel and direct dialogue has not always been possible. Other forms of dialogue are virtual, they bring people together to share ideas.

The Women for Peace Cyber Society was formed by a group of women who came together to share strategies. Beginning in 2010, every week five women from different parts of the world participate in a global dialogue. A Greek Cypriot, an Irish Catholic, a Kosovar, a Palestinian, and a Sudanese Muslim have all lived through conflict and have faced similar experiences and challenges. Through the Internet, a community for women in conflict has formed. Community members have common bonds. The society is a global support network for women peace activists. Although they have never met each other, their dialogues contribute to conflict resolution.

In this imagined future, Cyber societies and identities have not replaced traditional ethnic loyalties. Nationalism, religion, and common history traditionally shape ethnic identity. Ethnic identities are still strongly imbedded in societies, but understanding has increased through dialogue.

Idealistic or realistic, could the 2020 future be realized?

Cultures differ. The United States is not very similar to Sudan or to Northern Ireland. The future that I have painted may be idealistic, but it could be realistic. Dialogue is taking place in 2001. There are community dialogue groups in Northern Ireland and other divided societies that bring together young people.

Politicians are an important part of dialogue, but ordinary people working for peace should be recognized and encouraged. The world sees only violent images of deeply divided

societies. Outsiders seldom see the success stories of community dialogues that break down the barriers between ethnic groups. When dialogue is featured, it is often not constructive. High-level name calling matches are often reported instead of highlighting the work of young people to bring together communities.

Internet dialogue is it accessible and practical. The possibility of anonymity on the Internet facilitates discussing divisive issues. Reactions can be tempered in heated discussion, and dialogue can be more constructive. Internet dialogue is also flexible. The Internet can facilitate real time video conferencing and connect people across civilizations. Dialogue can change lives and it can change our world. In order to be effective, dialogue must be inclusive and spread wider than simply between presidents of nations. The Internet is a tool to expand global dialogue.

In order to be effective, dialogue must tackle the divisive issues. Because some cultures may feel threatened by dialogue, dialogue principles must be established. The multi-party peace negotiations in Northern Ireland were governed by the Mitchell Principles. Arms were left at the door and all parties involved used reasoned arguments to support their positions. Similarly, Internet dialogue must be governed by the principle of inclusiveness and equality. Any person wishing to engage in an open forum should be allowed to engage in on-line issue forums. Young people must pledge to leave prejudice at the door of a dialogue and to strive to simply understand, rather than change others' perspectives. Change may come through the mutual understanding that dialogue promotes.

September 11 is a date that is forever marked in the minds of Americans. It is a difficult for some to think about dialogue during a time of war, but it is imperative that Americans try to understand the views of others around the world. Because of the "One Nation" group, I have discussed the recent terrorist attacks on the United States from citizens from around the world. I will never forget the images of the World Trade Centers falling. I will never forget that two Muslim students left my university because our dialogue was not effective enough to prevent their discomfort. I will also never forget the "One Nation Group" discussions on the day of the attack, and the message of a friend from Nigeria who challenged the United States and critiqued our foreign policy. I did not agree, but I tried to understand his argument. Others in the "One Nation" group concurred with his message. We had a dialogue –although we are very different and sometimes disagree, our dialogue continues.