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## "We Are One Human Body" Global Empathy As A Central Value for Education for Sustainable Development

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I am writing this text as the world is being shocked by the tragedies of the famine in the Horn of Africa and the horrible attacks in Oslo where at least 76 people, most of them teenagers, were killed by a right-wing extremist who justified his bloody deeds with his disdain for multiculturalism and an alleged "islamization" of European societies.

On July 22, United Nation's secretary general Ban Ki-moon made an impassionate plea to help the famine-hit people in Somalia:

"Across the Horn of Africa, people are starving. A catastrophic combination of conflict, high food prices and drought has left more than 11 million people in desperate need. From within Somalia, we hear terrible stories of families who watched their children die, one by one. As a human family, these stories shock us. We ask: How is this happening again? After all, the world has enough food. And yes, economic times are hard. Yet since time immemorial, amid even the worst austerity, the compassionate impulse to help our fellow human beings has never wavered."<sup>1</sup>

In the few months between this momentous wake up call and the end of the printing of this book the fate of these fellow human beings, our neighbours around the corner of our street in the global village will have been sealed. I can just hope and act and pray that we will have risen to the occasion and have found the means for immediate relief - for the sake of every woman, child and man who are holding to life but also for the sake of ourselves whom fate has kept on the safe side of food security but whose credibility as bearers of the image of Gd is again at stake.

When we lose hope in our own capability to change their fate, those who miraculously will have survived will be doomed the next time the monstrous combination of drought, lawlessness and the callousness of nations and their citizens will befall them. And ultimately when they are lost we all are lost.

Thus it is for all our sakes that we are called to rescue our universal dream of being created in the image of Gd with the task and ability to restore the world to its original meaning of peace, of wholeness. In the words of one of the central prayers of the Jewish liturgy *letaken olam be malchut shaddai* – "To heal the world under Gds kingdom".

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1. <http://www.un.org/news/>

The secretary of the United Nations puts the finger on our sorest spot. As a human family, these stories shock us. Do they? Or have we become of stone, firm and safe and distant?

Survivors of the gun attack on Utoeya Island near Oslo reported that the assassin acted in cold blood and seemed somewhat detached from the atrocities he committed. What went wrong in his life that deprived himself from all humaneness, mercy and compassion?

And what prevents us at this juncture in time when the resources of technological innovation seem to be boundless to truly emerge as one caring family?

There is one at first sight mysterious chapter in the bible that may elucidate paradox, the building of the tower of Babel. After the flood that has destroyed almost the entire human family and Earth community, the rescued descendants of Noah seem to have come to their senses. As the text of chapter 11 states the whole world possessed one language and one common purpose. And what did they do, they built a tower whose head would reach the heavens. Gd did not approve and confused them with many different languages and scattered them over the face of the earth.

## What had gone wrong?

The midrash, the Jewish commentary tells the tale: During the building process it became more and more apparent that human life was dispensable but when a stone, diligently fashioned as to fit exactly, slipped out of the hands of those who climbed the immense ladders, it was considered a tragedy.

Now the stone had to be replaced from down under causing a long delay. However when a human being had fallen to his death, it did not create a problem, the other following him would replace him immediately. A society in which stones are more important than humans has no future.

The Earth Charter calls all of us at this critical moment of Earth history to come to our senses

and recognize that "in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. "

We have to move beyond tolerance to respect and from respect to love which expresses itself in the deep understanding that we need the other to complement and enrich our own identities. This understanding is expressed in one of the parables in Jewish tradition that is paralleled in other spiritual traditions: Humans form one body. When one part of the body aches other parts of the body feel the pain. When this sense is lost it is an indication of a fatal disease that will eventually ravish the whole body.

Education for sustainable development should help learners at all ages to build the capacity to empathize with the whole human family in such a way. In the Netherlands, we have launched the Day of Respect that is celebrated in more than 3.000 primary schools, with the exact purpose of enabling children to celebrate their cultural diversity and stimulating a sense of compassion and universal bonding.

The Day of Respect engages students in a year-long programme that culminates in a day of action where well-known personalities from the worlds of music, film and sports visit the participating schools as guest teachers and give presentations on what respect for cultural diversity means to them. Each year, more schools are participating in the programmes and reactions have been overwhelming. We are now in the process of bringing the positive experience of the Day of Respect to other countries, with pilot projects in Scotland and possibly also the Caribbean island of Aruba. We hope that more countries will join us.

In the Sayings of the Fathers cha 5, 20 it is stated

"Every controversy that is in the name of Heaven shall in the end lead to a permanent result, but every controversy that is not in the name of HEAVEN shall not lead to a permanent result".

In the light of this age old teaching I would like to introduce in our educational structures the goal of achieving competition for the sake of Heaven. Like fire, the urge to compete is a beneficial impulse when it helps to unlock the sources of strength and creativity in oneself. It is destructive when this competitive tendency is only directed to the self with no regard for the consequences for others.

Religions need to come together and join forces with our educational institutions in helping the individual to improve her capacity to compete not by advancing one's own interest at all costs but by sharing, learning and teaching and opening to the other.

We in the different spiritual traditions come to recognize that we truly need each other to reach inner and outer peace and benefit immensely from this process. By sharing our innermost wisdom, we become the champions of synergy.

Opening up to the other does not threaten our identity; on the contrary it strengthens it. The sense of competition for the sake of heaven may well change the discourse of negotiation. The forthcoming Rio + 20 Conference in June 2012 can mark a turning point when we recognize in each others' eyes the image of Gd and do not fear anymore the hidden agenda.

The heart of the universe is not matter, it is interaction. This is what we in the North can learn from people of the global South. Bishop Tutu calls it Ubuntu – being human by living out of bonding with the other. He writes: "We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.' A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the often quoted lines from the Earth Charter that, "we must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more not having more" needs to be understood in a reciprocal way - In order to walk the path from mere survival to full life we in the North need Ubuntu as much as the South needs our help in allocating the resources required to eradicate poverty and guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter and safe sanitation.

By incorporating concepts from different cultures and traditions such as Ubuntu and the competition for the sake of Heaven, schools can become compassionate institutions where one learns to celebrate diversity and relate with those who are nearby and far away. The Earth Charter and the Charter for Compassion that was put together under the visionary leadership of Karen Armstrong can be very helpful educational tools to build this capacity.

The day has come that humans who have been scattered over the face of the earth will realize that they can build the most exquisite towers in all the cities of the world provided they create at the same time the gardens of love, trust and human dignity.

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2. Tutu, Desmond (1999). No Future Without Forgiveness. P. 31.