Brief Remarks on Education and the Causes of War

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Let me begin by thanking this university for conferring this degree upon me. I am honoured and humbled. My most important duty this afternoon – and a very pleasant one indeed – is to congratulate all of you who have been awarded degrees today. I know this is the culmination of years of hard work, wrestling with the complexities of history, social studies, economics, ethics, philosophy and other aspects of what we might call 'thought'. The world has always been complicated and, paradoxically, the more we unravel its mysteries, the more complicated it becomes. As each separate discipline becomes deeper and more specialized, so the connections between disciplines increase in importance. Universities like this and students like you can help to make these connections. You have now joined what, in the 18th century, they called the 'Republic of Letters' and are hopefully ready to join the interdisciplinary dialogue about the future of humanity that will be central to the 21st century. Congratulations again.

Congratulations too to the friends and family of today's graduates. Your love and encouragement have, I am sure, played a part in their success. And, last but not least, congratulations to the staff of the university whose patient commitment to that noblest of human acts – teaching – has also played a major part in the success we are celebrating today.

All my career I have seen myself as an educator – sometimes in schools, sometimes in universities, sometimes in unions, sometimes in governments. My students have ranged from young children with severe special needs to Prime Ministers and Presidents, the latter category often harder to teach than the former.

Driving my commitment over more than 30 years of teaching has been a firm belief in the power of education to provide, for individuals, both liberation and fulfilment; and, for societies, the foundations of social and economic progress. I have never faltered in this belief and do not falter now. But increasingly I find myself faced with troubling questions: as the people of the world have become more educated, as has surely happened over the last 150 years, why is it that there are still so many unliberated and unfulfilled individuals? Why is it that socially and economically the world has not made more progress and, indeed, is more unequal than it has ever been? And why is it that we see interminable, violent conflicts in every corner of the planet – not just in Afghanistan and Iraq but in Sudan and Zaire, in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, in Colombia and Mexico and, closer to where we stand now, in Chechnya and Ingushetia?

Perhaps we should dismiss this as simply symptomatic of the human condition: perhaps Thomas Hobbes, the great British political philosopher of the 17th century, was right: may be life is, and always will be, "nasty, brutish and short." In any case, does not history show us, that violent conflict over religion, ideology, land and resources has always characterised human existence?

Well maybe – but then what is education for? Perhaps, it is simply to enable human beings to perfect their capacity to wage war. Perhaps it is not an accident that Prussia led the world in public education in the 19th century and Germany, its successor country, contributed so much to the violence of the first half of the 20th century. After all, it seems that the combination of public education, great universities and the extraordinary scientific developments since the Enlightenment has indeed enabled human beings to perfect the art of war. From the moment – on 6 August 1945 – that Hiroshima was destroyed by an atom bomb we have known that we have the power to destroy the planet we inhabit. How much more perfect than that can the art of war become? Who, before the 20th century, would have predicted, or thought sensible, that the guarantee of peace during the long Cold War would come, not from resolving underlying conflicts, but from the idea of Mutually Assured Destruction? It is a delicate irony that the abbreviation in English of this chilling phrase is MAD. Is this the outcome those who campaigned for universal public education in 19th and early 20th centuries would have predicted? Is it the most we can expect from education? Is it the best we can do?

Personally, I believe we **can** do better. I refuse to accept that violent conflict is inevitable or that stockpiles of nuclear weapons in an increasing number of countries are the best way to secure peace. I see in many moments through history a capacity for human beings to think and do much better than this. Voltaire may have said that "History is nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortune" but I can see that it is also full of acts of brilliance and beauty, generosity and self sacrifice, inspiration and understanding. I must admit though, the evidence is mixed, so my refusal to accept a bleak view of our prospects is in part a moral stance. Vaclav Havel, the great Czech playwright who later became president, argued that under communism he insisted on living **as if** he were free. I intend to live **as if** humanity will thrive in the future and **as if** education has much to contribute to achieving this outcome. My stance is also deeply personal. I want my grandson Jacob to live a rich and fulfilling life along with his peers across the globe – and with them too, pass the planet onto future generations in better shape.

Surely once faced, as we have been from the mid 20th century onwards, with the possibility of our own extinction, we have had what an economist might call the 'ultimate incentive' to develop a new ethic that would enable life on Earth to continue to thrive? Einstein argued that, "the unleashed power of the atom changed everything except our modes of thought." Isn't it time, now, before it is too late, that we change our modes of thought too?

Perhaps pacifism is the answer? Certainly it is an understandable ethical response to the developments of recent centuries. Given the immense destructive potency of war, surely a

refusal to fight under any circumstances makes sense? As a poster on the wall of the school I attended, read, *If men refused to fight, war would cease*.

I was brought up in a Quaker family and attended a Quaker school. Quakerism is a relatively small branch of the Protestant Reformation. It originates in the 1650s, a reaction to the turmoil of the English Civil War. Its founder, George Fox, believed that there should be no mediator of the Word of God and that, therefore, there was no need for a priest or bishop or vicar. It was for each human being to read the Bible and reach his or her own relationship with God; moreover, he argued, because there was "that of God" within everyone, no person should treat others or expect to be treated, differently because of their rank or social class. In 17th century England, this was revolutionary. Finally, he argued, if every person was of equal worth, on what basis could violence against another person ever be justified? From the outset, therefore, Quakers were pacifists. In the numerous conflicts of the ensuing centuries they stood by what they called their Peace Testimony.

Needless to say, over the centuries, especially when waves of fervent nationalism took Britain to war, as happened often, they were persecuted. Even in the First World War, Quakers who refused to fight were sometimes imprisoned and often vilified by their neighbours. By the time of the Second World War, however, British law had advanced and evidence of a firm and longstanding commitment to Quakerism was accepted as a justification for refusing to fight. In 1940 my father was one of those who – as the law put it – "conscientiously objected" to fighting. Instead, he joined a Quaker organisation, the Friends' Ambulance Unit, which provided medical supplies (rather like the Red Cross) to those involved in combat. I grew up admiring my father's convictions and his courage in putting them into practice. I admire them still.

I offer this personal history to explain how I have often come to consider pacifism as the right and rational response to the state of the modern world – but each time I consider it I hesitate for two reasons. First of all, as a historian, I try to cast my mind back to Britain in the summer of 1940. With France and most of continental Europe overwhelmed by the Nazis and neither Russia nor America yet involved in the War, could I really have refused to fight? Somehow I doubt it – and, in any case, philosophically I have to ask myself, not just what I would have done, but what would have happened if most young men had refused to fight? Suppose those young men who heroically flew the Spitfires which defeated the Luftwaffe over Southern England in the summer of 1940 had refused to fight? I could make a similar case – perhaps more fundamental still – in relation to the young men, indeed all the citizens of Leningrad and Moscow in 1941 and 1942.

There is another doubt that I have about pacifism too – which is that it all-too-easily becomes passive; a pretext for standing aside from the conflicts of world history rather than participating in them. In seeking to oppose violent conflict, it is tempting to avoid all conflict with the consequence, paradoxically, that aggression triumphs. This type of thinking meant that for some periods of history many Quakers simply withdrew from the society around them. Of course, this is not true of all pacifists. My father did not stay at

home. Instead, he spent nearly four years in China, often in dangerous circumstances, providing medical supplies to those who needed them. Then there are those who have turned non-violence into an instrument of social change – Gandhi, Martin Luther King and the later Nelson Mandela are all remarkable examples. This active pacifism is a creed that brought change for the better in the 20th century and has much to contribute to our future.

But admire this active pacifism though I do, it does not help me decide how to live my life, all day, every day. Nor, on its own, does it make sense for me of the value of education. Then recently, in Washington, outside the Quaker Meeting House (the name Quakers give to their 'Church') I saw a poster which read very simply, *How does your life help to remove the causes of war?*

This is a very profound question. It is also a very tough question! It uses a strong word – remove; it is not enough, this implies, not to contribute to causing war; one has to help to **remove** its causes. It requires action. It requires participation. It requires, too, that one reflects on what the causes of war actually are and does something about them – and history tells us a great deal about this. We know that intolerance, greed, ignorance, pride, prejudice, fear and revenge play their part. We also know that oppression, grotesque inequality and conflict over scarce resources – iron, oil, food, water – make their contribution.

This question, therefore, prompts me to ask myself what I am doing in my life to **remove** intolerance, greed, ignorance, pride, prejudice, fear and revenge. It does help me to decide how to live my life, all day and every day. If I am to help remove the causes of war, I must by my own actions, challenge oppression, reduce inequality and relieve the pressures on the world's natural resources. These are things I can do all day, every day.

It is worth noting that this tough question does not necessarily imply pacifism. For example, a true pacifist would reject the deployment of British soldiers in Sierra Leone – yet the historical record shows that as a result of their presence, Sierra Leone, after a long-running, brutal and largely forgotten war, found peace. The deployment of force to establish peace is fraught with difficulty, both ethically and practically, but sometimes it is necessary. It is, though, never sufficient; after the soldiers, need to come the builders of trust and reconciliation and the builders of effective democratic states. Too often, once we have deployed force to bring peace, we breathe a sigh of relief and fail to tackle the underlying causes of the preceding war, even though all the evidence tells us that an unresolved conflict, however long postponed, is all too likely to re-ignite later, even sometimes in the next generation. The conflicts following the breakup of Yugoslavia are a case in point.

You must forgive me for this introspective musing on what for all of you is a day of celebration. I have set out my incomplete thoughts this afternoon because I want to give meaning to the word **education.** I want to give meaning to your achievement, beyond the degree you have been awarded. I peer "through a glass darkly," as they say in English, at the decades ahead and there are times I fear for our future. When I was born there were

2.5 billion people on the planet; by the middle of this century there will be 9 billion people. How, then, will we produce enough for everyone to live fulfilled lives without in the process generating conflict for increasingly scarce raw materials and driving temperatures on the planet to unsustainable levels? For all the economic growth of the second half of the 20th century, we find ourselves with more poor people now than there were people in total on the planet fifty years ago. And our natural resources, not just coal, oil and metals but the ice-cap, the rivers and the wildernesses are becoming depleted, precisely as our population peaks and the challenge of poverty is greater than it has ever been. How, for example, did we create circumstances in which great rivers, such as the Indus and the Rio Grande, simply dry up? These profound changes create a context in which conflict and war are more likely and in which any number of acts of intolerance, greed, ignorance, pride, prejudice and fear could provide the spark that lights the conflagration. As we speak there are wars on almost every continent – any one of which could escalate. So I cannot say I do not fear for the future. I do. But I can say there is hope too...I can live **as if**…

Sometimes I peer through that glass darkly and I see a future filled with hope. I see remarkable young people wherever I go – including in this room today. I believe in the power of education to change lives, to unlock potential, and create futures for humanity which are rich and rewarding, for everyone, beyond our current imaginings. I see that education could contribute to removing every single one of the causes of war I have listed.

For this, though, we need a deeper education which develops thought as well as knowledge, character as well as intellect, dialogue as well as reflection, humility as well as leadership and, above all, which has a basis in the ethics on which our futures depend. We need this education for everyone – the poor, the oppressed and the marginal as well as the wealthy, the powerful and the well-connected. And we need this education to tackle the complex, difficult reality of human existence; to legitimise and encourage debate of conflicting accounts of the past and divergent views of the future. Pursuit of this kind of education is what inspires my commitment to my work and helps me answer that profound question. It is my mission.

One reason why the massive expansion of public education in the last 150 years has not made the world more peaceful or more equal is that much of it was not education of the kind I have described. Some of it was plain indoctrination and much of it reinforced prejudices of one group against another. Often it was passive, promoting merely the learning of preordained accounts of the world rather than encouraging argument, debate and the pursuit of the truth. Too often it did not light those sparks of knowledge, which, in Havel's words, "might light the road ahead for all humanity." Moreover, it is only very recently, in the last 20 years or so at most, that the idea of high standards of education for everyone has become accepted. In the 20th century whether in the Soviet Bloc or the West, education systems were fundamentally selective, designed to identify and develop an elite, leaving the rest with the basic minimum required for 20th century life. Increasingly, leaders in government and business, as well as education, recognise that we have to do better.

Much better. Moreover, around the world a growing number of education leaders, though still a small minority, has realised not just that we have to do better but that we know an increasing amount about **how** to do better. In the last 10 years we've begun to understand the characteristics of great education systems. We are just discovering what systems have to do to become great. Of course, even the best don't yet succeed for everyone at the levels I've just advocated, but if we, all around the world, learnt the lessons from the best systems and applied them consistently, we would make vast strides forward and, perhaps, build the confidence to take the bold steps that will be needed in the decades ahead.

Here is our hope. We need citizens in the future who can contribute to the economy constructively and imaginatively; who can contribute to their communities by participating in decisions and acting to make them better places to live; who can contribute to their countries by urging their governments to adopt a broad, generous interpretation of national self-interest; and who can contribute to the world by demanding that political and business leaders everywhere, rise above faction and short-term self-interest and recognise that only by acting together, boldly, urgently and ethically, can they ensure that the fears for the 21st century are conquered and the hopes fulfilled. Only through education – through well-educated citizens demanding the best from themselves and their leaders – can we help to remove the causes of war. In short, our future depends, as never before, on great teachers, great schools and great universities offering great opportunities and on great citizens – people just like yourselves – seizing them.

Today, the award to you of a degree is recognition of an opportunity seized. Tomorrow, after the party you have surely earned, perhaps, along with me, you can ask yourselves "How does my life help to remove the causes of war?" If that question informed our education systems and drove the actions of ever growing numbers of people around the world, then your children and grandchildren, and my grandson Jacob, would have every hope of a future of fulfilment. Then, at the very least, in the words of the famous song, "I swear in the days still left, we will walk in fields of gold."

Thank you for listening and congratulations once again.

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