



## Enhancing Human Flourishing Within the 2030 Development Agenda: The Spirituality of Global Transformation

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### Section I: Introduction

In 2000 the UN marked the arrival of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a commitment to eight Millennium Development Goals to address the world's greatest challenges. Fifteen years afterwards, the UN renewed its commitment to facing the world's biggest crises – this time with an emphasis on universality and transformation. The *2030 Sustainable Development Goals* adopted in September of 2015 by the UN General Assembly signals a collective journey to end poverty, transform lives and protect the planet in the years to come.

In reflecting in depth on the *2030 Development Agenda*, in October 2015, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) convened a dialogue around the question: “*What deep human and organizational transformation is required to support the goals of sustainable development, and how might such transformation arise in human beings who have experienced suffering and trauma?*” Around the table were respected policy experts, psychologists, neuroscientists, academics, ethicists, journalists, spiritual leaders and those who work in the field delivering UN programs. Their collective interest was to consider the question of human flourishing and sustainability with attention to an increasingly global, inter-spiritual and multicultural convergence on the “interconnectedness” of the world’s seven billion people. *The main conclusion was that sustainable development requires a “spiritual transformation” of ourselves and the organizations we are linked with that actively extends to the societal, global, and ecological levels.*

Global “transformation” is best understood as first taking place in the inner sphere of personal and organizational reflection as well as discernment. Transformation is then in the broadest sense “spiritual” - a concept difficult to define because it is deeply personal and individual, and goes beyond formal notions of ritual or religious practice to the very essence of who we are. But we can capture the idea of “spiritual transformation” with the help of a “word cluster” of contrasts: compassion over indifference, humility over humiliation, cooperation over isolation, kindness over cruelty, transparency over deception, forgiveness over revenge, equality over disparity, oneness over fragmentation, security over fear, rights over abuse, empathy over detachment, respect over discrimination, tolerance over fundamentalism, liberty over oppression, life over killing, love over hatred, giving over hoarding, peace over war, and hope over despair. We assert that global transformation requires a spiritual movement of ourselves and our

organizations toward the ideal of a love for all humanity without exception that affirms inherent human dignity, innate rights, and the integrity of the natural environment.

Enhancing spiritual transformation and human flourishing within the 2030 Development Agenda can only succeed as people everywhere advance in the consciousness of a “oneness” that lies within, and from this source gather their energies in practical solutions to wars based on religious and national allegiance, to the polluting of our planet and linked global warming, and to the growing billions of people who have almost nothing while others have more than they could possibly ever need. Given the increasing technological powers of human self-destruction and planetary devastation, “spiritual transformation” is our remaining pathway to sustainability as a species embedded on this earth. It is impossible to separate individual “spiritual transformation” from implicit moral, cultural, economic, ecological, and ultimately political transformations.

## **Section II: Sustainable Development as a Transformative Spiritual Phenomenon**

When we consider the long-term collective impact of wars, generational poverty, socio-economic inequalities, dogmatic fundamentalism, the refugee crisis, ecological disasters, and the like, it becomes clear that the social and individual consequences of egoistic consciousness present humankind with a survival crisis. For instance, in Palestine, a seven year old child has lived through three wars, while in Colombia six million people have been registered as victims of conflict affecting multiple generations. In general, we respond to the basic needs of those who have been traumatized with food, water, and healthcare, but the issue of the dissociated self is seldom addressed, and the result is a cycle of more victims, violence, killing, and abuse.

The problems of our world are so deep that sustainable development requires an underpinning grounded in the enduring well-spring of human spirituality and the related capacity for resilience and for compassion. How do we nurture the significant shift in inner awareness and attitude that allows people to overcome justifiable bitterness and hostility, and focus themselves on renewed meaning and hope through contributing to the lives of others despite challenges and resentment? Change at this level comes from a deep inner core of conscience constituting the authentic self that precedes our current cultural experience and allows us to make a different kind of sense of it. This conscience allows us to move from reacting in fear or anger to a deeper reflection from our inner spiritual resources. This journey is ultimately one of a shift in consciousness toward interconnectedness with one another and with nature, renewed appreciation for the value and dignity of human life without exception, respectful tolerance and acceptance of other forms of belief, and empathic relationships. Whether we are secular or religious, the bottom line is that the greatest leap forward in human consciousness will come with a deeper awareness of a love for all humanity that goes beyond self-interest however “enlightened” to an authentic equal regard for a shared human dignity.

An elevation in the experience of oneness, conscience, and unconditional love that is necessary for human progress is imperative if we are to respond fully to the suffering caused by inequalities, violence, natural disasters, wars, and displacements and post-conflicts that have become chronic for individuals and entire communities around

the world. Many people everywhere now are searching for ways to pull hearts together based on the consciousness of oneness. They are turning toward many perennial forms of spiritual practice where the authentic self can shine through into a life of inner peace and love.

### **Section III: Restorative Narratives of Human Flourishing and Growth**

Human beings are narrative creatures, and when we share narratives of spiritual transformation and recovery they provide a healing framework for self and others. For a deep sustainable transformation, we need a current narrative that connects love, justice and sustainability. This narrative can develop through a bottom-up process with the participation of the people and populations involved in events, and allow attention to universal spiritual values that are widely accepted as well as to inner development towards experiences of unity and life in common. This narrative is grounded in local stories of individual shift from an ego-linked to a global-oneness paradigm.

Spirituality is a factor across all the dynamics of human experience and is by no means limited to circumstances of trauma. But it is particularly important to those who are coping with major life challenges, including forms of violence, discrimination and exclusion. Such challenges, however deplorable, are also opportunities for change. Human beings are hard wired for resilience. Many people are somehow able to come through horrifying events with a sense of hope for humanity intact and even deepened. This is connected in part to their own inner narrative about what has happened to them, and is often spiritual in nature. Restorative narrative acknowledges the truth of their experience and it also affirms their strength, dignity and worth. Their inner narrative tells of their connection to others – to family, community and others who see them and value them – and to transcendent or higher sources of meaning. Their narrative has space for action that moves them towards reconnection with a larger whole and consequent healing. Such narratives work at the level of individuals, communities and countries.

A culture of human flourishing and resilience must revolve around narratives that connect us all to the subjective experience of inner development, and to a quality that researchers refer to as “hardiness” - a commitment to finding meaning in life, to influencing outcomes and surroundings, to learning and growing from all life experiences. So many narratives of resilience center on assets such as perseverance, service, altruism, kindness, meaning, gratitude, consciousness, and compassionate love. These are the narratives that occur every day in the face of severe traumatic stress, from Paris to Damascus to Jerusalem. We need to tell these narratives to get the full story of humanity. There are innumerable acts of kindness and love that arise daily in defiance of humiliation and violence. Narratives move us beyond the numbers and statistics of violence and exclusion to the human experience of confronting loss and disappointment with faith, hope, love and courage.

The media can be valuable partners in shaping the emergent narrative of human flourishing and resilience for sustainable development – especially if they remain engaged over time. Restorative narratives<sup>1</sup> acknowledge the bad things that happen, but they don’t stop there. They embrace the spectrum of resilience and recovery that is innate

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<sup>1</sup> See more on restorative narrative at Images & Voices of Hope ([ivoh.org/restorativenarrative](http://ivoh.org/restorativenarrative))

to the human spirit, and the tenacity of faith and hope in the future. By “hope” we do not mean mere dispositional optimism; we mean the virtue of hope that is realistic, enduring, strengthened by challenges, and seeking a path to a brighter future.

#### **Section IV: Human Suffering and the Spirituality of Resilience**

The transformative process that the *2030 Development Agenda* calls for a focus on the ways in which individuals and societies place the self and the reconstruction of the self at the center of human sustainable development. We must understand and build on human resilience in crisis interventions, especially for those who have been traumatized by war, violence, discrimination or natural calamities. When suffering and traumatized populations are not supported in a transformative process, they stand to perpetuate the patterns of dissociation they are experiencing into the next generation. If we are to truly build a sustainable and transformative world we need to address the persistent reality of traumatized societies, understand what produces real and lasting transformation and what supports restoration and resilience.

Researchers consistently have pointed to spirituality as a contributing positive factor in coping and resilience. In this broad sense, spirituality gives breath and hope to individuals, families and communities navigating traumatic stress. Evidence shows that spirituality can help protect trauma survivors from developing psychiatric difficulties like PTSD or depression; reduce anger, rage, and the desire for revenge following trauma through practices consistent with mindfulness, forgiveness and love; help people make meaning out of suffering; contribute to grief recovery for survivors of loss; help in overcoming isolation and social withdrawal through community; allow the processing of traumatic events through healing rituals and commemorative ceremonies; and nurture hope.

The wide heterogeneity of human responses to human suffering and traumatic stressors are to be emphasized.

There are resistant people who, when buffeted by trauma can stand firm and unbending, remaining relatively protected because of an inner narrative that provides meaning and perspective. There are those who bend but do not break, and spring back quickly with the help of a restorative narrative. Some bend in the wind, suffer a great deal, and while not springing back to their original shape are still able to function at some basic level. These individuals have the greatest potential for growth and transformation, tend to draw heavily on spirituality and narrative, and are able to be more resilient in the future. They undergo *posttraumatic growth* (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995), the experience of “positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” as manifested in improved relationships, openness to new possibilities, renewed appreciation for life, enhanced personal strength, and spiritual development. Such resilient people suffer some transitive disruptions in their ability to function, and then seem to move on to new challenges effectively. But our knowledge of those who experience trauma derives largely from those who have sought treatment. As a result many professionals underestimate and misunderstand resilience, often viewing it as rare when in fact it is an inherent human quality.

How can we listen more attentively to the stories of spiritual transformative and resilience? Human beings can be resilient in spite of experiences that have broken their hearts and scarred their memories. For growth to take place, we have to support the inner awareness of the individuals affected. We have to attend diligently to their physical and financial conditions, but also focus on the condition of their hearts and minds. We have to understand what cultivates recovery and growth deep within the human heart even in time of intense hardship.

Victims of trauma need to have a key role in the recovery process. Experts in mental health of course have a place in responding to trauma, but “professional expertise” and “medicalization” have diverted attention from the stories of personal growth that often arise following trauma. Although trauma survivors need help in ways that can require specific expertise in trauma psychology (e.g., emotional regulation strategies and education about how symptoms of trauma can be considered normal human responses and can be precursors to growth), a good deal of the process involves relationships that require from the helper patience in listening to and reconstructing the life story, noticing personal strengths and change, and the development of a new life purpose or mission that includes aspects of service to others. In other words, we have de-emphasized the web of community relationships and related systems of meaning, reparative methods based on the sharing of narratives and spirituality, and the fact that in most lives some episode of trauma serves as a major transformational benchmark in the journey of life from which a deeper life purpose can emerge.

Often “wounded healers” heal best and can contribute uniquely well to resilience in others, using their experiences for the benefit of one another. This is not to be anti-expert, but we believe that part of the process of restoration to wholeness requires that individuals navigating trauma be active agents contributing to their own journey and to the lives of others through growth in consciousness and conscience. We encourage people in their various spiritual traditions to draw on the resources of positive psychology, which emphasizes growth and character strengths over the disease model, and on their storytellers and sages, poetry and songs, their wisdom of old, spiritual and ritual practices, and other perennial assets that often developed over the centuries to allow people to overcome the adversity that will always be, to some degree, an aspect of the human journey.

## **Section V: Educating Youth in the Spirituality of Transformation**

Young people are often the victims of the traumatic events that sweep across the globe. They are susceptible and yet also bear the burgeoning seeds of resilience. Research points to young people raised to hate by age 4 in Middle East and Belfast, among many other places across the globe. They often become disenfranchised adolescents seeking meaning in the wrong places – like extreme fundamentalist movements of violence and hatred. Can we encourage educational programs for young people that engage them in experiential learning on the themes of benevolence, creative service, and a shared or common humanity? Can we develop an educational approach emphasizing compassion rather than indifference? An approach that fosters cooperation, dignity, equality, justice, compassion, honesty, spiritual practice, non-killing, and love? We need to teach youth more about the nature of the spirituality of universal love and its grounding in the best of

all spiritual traditions. We can encourage the theme of universal love for humanity as a centrally important priority in grade schools, colleges, and professional schools.

We can also make education in the nature of resilience a priority, and inspire young people with the narratives of growth that are so vital to their formation. These narratives of resilience need to be the subject of classes in literature, social science, philosophy, leadership, healthcare, and the like. We want to see young people to develop their own narratives of love and resilience from an early age in defiance of those who might peddle hatred.

There are numerous successful educational programs and clubs for youth already being embedded in schools teaching them mindfulness, meditation, empathy development, self-awareness, forgiveness, self-control, and nonviolence, including anti-bullying initiatives and interventions designed to eliminate sexual harassment and abuse. This pedagogy can be extended to focus on our connectedness with others and with nature.

## **Section VI: Concluding Aspirations**

The concepts around spirituality, interconnected consciousness, resilience and growth can enrich the discourse on the *2030 Sustainable Development Agenda* in the way that certain emergent ideas amplified our interpretation of the *Millennium Development Goals* fifteen years ago. Though we rarely speak of spiritual solutions in UN settings, the notion of transformation as spiritual is well within the UN's original scope. The UN was created as a spiritual body in the wake of the Second World War when humanity was horrified and terrified by genocide and brutalism. "No more crimes against humanity," it was said, and "Never again." But we all realize today how elusive progress is, and we would therefore like to see discussion around spiritual transformation across the UN in the context of all 17 sustainable development goals.

Dag Hammarskjold, who studied the spirituality of all traditions, asserted that our common purpose and source of resilience as human beings is grounded in a personal identity realized through actions of creative love toward others, and that the contemplative life is a pathway to spiritual-political activism. Following Hammarskjold's death the United Nations commemorated his life with the 1964 installation of *UN Chagall Window*, 15 feet wide and 12 feet high, in which the artist Marc Chagall drew on symbols of love and peace from innumerable spiritual traditions. We suggest that the *Sustainable Development Goals* require a new spiritual activism within the United Nations and globally if they are to become manifest in the world and serve as a source of healing. We also recommend renewed call for an end to religious violence of any kind.

The Preamble of the United Nations Charter urges us "to affirm the worth and dignity of the human person." We often forget how many of those who were instrumental in drafting the Charter held spiritual perspectives. They needed deep purpose and a faith in human dignity as a spiritual principle to affirm so boldly against "the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind," and to urge us to avoid cynicism in renewed "faith in fundamental human rights and the dignity worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small..." They were, in the wake of two world wars, only too aware of the extent to

which all human rights can be easily violated. They were themselves models of resilience with faith in human dignity as a spiritual reality, to be recognized as such in everyone.

The *Sustainable Development Goals*, consistent with the time-honored United Nations tradition of a spiritual vision to be realized on the individual and international levels, call upon us to bring spiritual transformation back to the center of our work. We as a species must learn to love one another or suffer the consequences. To survive, and beyond that, to flourish, we need an elevation in spiritual consciousness, global conscience, and consequent loving actions. This is already occurring in our time, and it must triumph over fear-based behaviors. An inclusive, tolerant, and accepting spirituality can quicken the realization of the *Sustainable Development Goals* with its pledge *to ensure that no one is left behind*. UN organizations can and should take the lead in this paradigm shift that will enable moral, political and social change to be realized from the groundwork of spiritual transformation. This transformation must be based on a love for humanity as well as for other sentient beings and for nature. This form of “compassionate love” is at the center of our emerging inter-spiritual age, and only with it we can change ourselves and our world.

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