

Paper by Rabbi Soetendorp: Building a Partnership of Compassion and Love between the Generations.

*Abstract:*

*In his address, Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp speaks about the necessity of making creative use of the internet for building a partnership of compassion between the generations, nations, and religious traditions – a partnership that weaves together the wisdom, the life lessons and the moral and spiritual teachings of our elders, as well as the daring visions of our young.*

Your excellencies,

I am very grateful about the opportunity to participate in this high-level conference and exchange experiences with you about the conference theme of “Raising the New Generation With a Foundation of Values and Tradition: Religious Perspectives.”

In our globalized era that has been perpetuated by technological revolutions such as the rise of the internet, of mobile phones and of globally broadcasting media stations, it is crucial that we find new and creative ways to use these new channels to provide moral and spiritual guidance to our young people. Especially as the overflow of information has led to a lack of orientation about what is really important and necessary in life, and as many of our young people are afraid of the major world problems we are inheriting to them, such as massive ecological devastation, climate change and huge social imbalances in the global community that threaten the foundations of life as we know it.

Remarkably, the very last words of the biblical Book of Prophets state that the only way the complete destruction of Earth and all its inhabitants can be averted is when harmony is restored between the generations. “Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Eternal, to turn the hearts of parents to

their children and the hearts of children to their parents – lest I come, and smite the land with destruction” (Malachi 4:4-6). These words, spoken by an anonymous prophet named Malachi, “my messenger,” about the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., resonate with great force in our age.

An ancient Jewish parable addresses these intergenerational responsibilities in simple terms. In the parable, an old man is planting a fruit tree. A young man passes by and remarks, “Foolish old man, you will never be able to reap the fruits of the tree.” The old man retorts, “Foolish young man, when I was born I did not come into a desert. My ancestors planted trees for me. And I do not want to leave a forlorn land without trees to your generation.” Is this age old truth self-evident at the beginning of the third millennium following a century which experienced indomitable progress and most cruel destruction? We, the elders, need to recognize the next generation’s fears and despair. We have not planted the healthy fruit trees, at least not enough, and the threat of destruction is real. We can only together retrieve the moral resources needed to rebuild the inclusive world community of decency in which no one is degraded.

What is desperately needed is the strengthening of compassion and hope. Compassion, in the fine definition of Martha Nussbaum, is to feel the painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune. Compassion is not hereditary, it is not transmitted by genes, but it can, and, therefore, must be, taught. To this end, the different spiritual traditions, certainly including the Abrahamic faiths, together with faith traditions from the East, can and must contribute to this effort, and need to make creative use of new media to reach out to our young, and tell the stories of the past.

Against this background, I would like to share some experiences of the “Feather Project” that was recently launched in the Peace Palace in The Hague – a new multimedia initiative to encourage intergenerational dialogue and collaboration that seeks to draw upon the wisdom of the world’s spiritual traditions to address the major global challenges humanity is facing.

It is the custom of Native Americans to hand the elders a feather and ask them to relate to the young generation what particular lesson they want them to hold to, all through their lives. In my own experience, I have come to realize how important it is also for the elders to hear and learn the ambitions and hopes of the young. Therefore, the Feather Project involves capturing on video the core messages of moral and spiritual leaders of our time, based on the question: "Based on your life experience, what lesson would you like to share with the next generation?". These messages are being captured in short video clips, which are being made available on the internet, and are being combined with the visions, dreams, and aspirations of young people, as well as suggested steps to put this inspiration into practice. I believe with all my heart that in the combination of the visions of the young and the wisdom of the elders lies a key to unlocking the immense resources of human imagination, creativity and compassion that are so much needed in our troubled times.

In the course of the Project, we seek to involve religious leaders such as Imam Ilyasi, chair of the All India Organization of Imams and Mosques, the Dalai Lama, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Amma, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Patriarch Bartholomew, and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs. Just imagine if their life's messages, their stories and their moral and spiritual teachings could become as famous and popular as the music videos of those "pop stars" like Britney Spears or Robbie Williams the young generation is so keen about.

We know in our heart and bones that G-d who created us in His Image, calls upon us every hour to mend, repair the world, to heed the cry of every single child that is going hungry. As we deeply recognize each other uniqueness, and celebrate the manifold differences, we at the same time know to the core of our being, that we constitute one human family, bound together in mutual responsibility. We are one body, when one part of the body aches, the other parts feel the pain. When one part is hungry, besieged by violence, and degradation, we all feel deprived. So let us work together to build a global partnership of compassion and love across the generations, nations and religious traditions, and use every possible medium to spread this call of urgency.

Please let me end by sharing my own lesson, the experience of a baby seeking refuge – the story that constitutes the background for all my encounters with the young generation. The man of the resistance, holding me in a suitcase with holes in it, knocked on the door. Ria and Bertus van der Kemp opened the door. In a split second, they had the choice to take care of this Jewish baby, with all the risks entailed, or to close the door. By opening the door widely they gave me life. More and more, I see myself, I see ourselves, holding the doorknob in our hands. The door is ajar. Do we open or close the door? Millions upon millions of children in desperate need are staring at us with frightened eyes. Do we close the door, or open it widely?