

Remarks by Gay Rosenblum-Kumar

at the "Spirit of the United Nations" Awards, 20 October 2014

Spirit of the UN – Talking Points

My dear civil society colleagues, NGO representatives, my other awardees, ladies and gentleman and especially the hosts of this event and other Excellencies.....I have always wanted to turn the normal greeting around and give credit where credit is due!

I feel very honored to be offered this award by the NGO Spirit of the UN Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns and accept, recognizing all of my UN colleagues who work selflessly at UNHQ and in many countries and especially in war zones. I feel very blessed to have had so many opportunities to serve people around world by working at the UN. As Swami Parameshananda said, I have been motivated in my life by causes of justice and causes of peace. For me they are interrelated with spirituality. I believe that there is a human right to peace; that **not** having peace is an injustice, and any injustice is an affront, if not a crime, against the human spirit. To work for any one of these is to work for the others.

Though not raised in a conventionally religious family, I grew up with an unspoken belief and practice demonstrated by my wise parents and mentor, Dimitri Argyriades, who are here today that is akin to the Dalai Lama's saying that 'my religion is loving-kindness.' However, I grew up unaware of all my privilege and by an accident of fate having the good fortune to be born to caring parents, in a comfortable home, part of a majority culture, without want, without fear or injustice, with education free and a guaranteed future. My parents, (who took time off from packing and selling their home next week to be here today), just found a letter from 34 years ago after my first trip to sub-Saharan Africa in 1979, when I first left my cocoon and where I realized that my Global North way of thinking and being was not the only way nor necessarily the right way, and that one needs to be open and willing to respect and coexist with ideas and people quite different from one's self.

That first trip was my introduction to the reality of the developing world especially under apartheid, where contradictions in life seemed to stand out in starker contrast and where humans' wonderful demonstration of love, compassion, charity and resilience was diminished by unchecked greed and short-sighted cruelty.

It then motivated me to see my own culture with all its warts and injustices and realize how much work there is to do on oneself and in the world to counteract injustice and **unloving-ness**. It may seem that the world hasn't gotten much better over these thirty years of my career, but actually it has. There are more people out of poverty, more children in school, fewer (though equally horrific) wars, less people living under oppression, and most importantly, **many** more people finally believing that they are entitled to human rights and taking action to pursue their right to peace and justice. Working at the UN has shown me how closely this world and its people are tied together. How dependent we are on one another.

However, working at the UN and trying to maintain one's spiritual practice is not easy and often cannot be publicly announced for fear of being discounted or marginalized. Spirituality is trumped by the premium placed on politics and power over what is 'right' and 'just'. Without a spiritual base, one does not have the freedom from fear to speak truth

to power with as much loving-kindness as possible. I believe doing so has impact. I have always seen the UN's work, its staff, diplomats and NGO colleagues as a microcosm of the entire planet, a human experiment under a public microscope viewed by all. Until we, at the UN, can demonstrate the example of holding in check personal ego and provincial interests in favor of the larger community, the rest of the world will not be able to work it out. We have to model right here what we want to see in the world. In the words of Gandhi, 'be the change you want to see.'

Although we as individuals are quite small in the face of the massive challenges facing the UN and the world, there are big and small things we can do, principles we can uphold, actions we can take, beliefs we can follow, attitudes we can model, love we can demonstrate. For me this has always meant to have an impact where one can, in policy and practice, one-on-one, one person at a time. And, I have tried to demonstrate this in every encounter whether with a government official, an NGO worker, a taxi driver or hotel maid, one must walk and talk with loving-kindness. I have tried to do this in all that I have done and wherever possible, be it in a brown bag lunch about conflict in the Congo or conflict in the office. I have tried to raise awareness that justice and peace in the world starts at home with respect and loving-kindness for all those around us.

As Swami Parameshananda said, I have been very motivated by my association with other spiritually committed people at the UN such as Ambassador Chowdhury who has led innumerable efforts for peace, Vijaya Catherine Claxton who promoted internal UN peacebuilding in her dedicated service to strengthen mediation at the Office of Staff Legal Services as well as thru meditation at the UN (I don't think it is a coincidence that there is only one letter's difference between mediation and meditation!), and many others who put their spiritual principles to work at the UN on a daily basis and, most of all, by Sri Chinmoy whose meditation sessions at the Secretariat inspired me and many of his followers to offer their service to the cause of inner and outer peace. I would like to offer an inspiring quotation of Sri Chinmoy's that sums up my philosophy and approach:

The outer message of the United Nations is **peace**.

The inner message of the United Nations is **love**.

The inmost message of the United Nations is **oneness**.

It is my greatest hope that I have contributed to this vision. It was a great privilege to do this at the UN for 25 years and especially my last five years at the helm of the interagency Framework Team for Preventive Action where I tried to contribute:

- to **peace** through my work to build capacities for peace in conflict-prone countries,
- to **love** through the unconventional activities of the Framework Team to share knowledge about bringing justice through peacebuilding and conflict prevention and (to quote Sri Chinmoy again) that 'it is only through inner peace that we can have outer freedom'
- to **oneness** by creating safe spaces where people from all different walks of life and parts of the UN and the world could come together to share their views and visions and co-create a more peaceful, just world.

I have been blessed with generous and hard-working co-workers, I have been blessed with my husband Dinesh who has patiently and peacefully tried to support our spiritual path together, and I am blessed with two wonderful children (Shanti, meaning peace) and Remi (meaning compassion) who are both trying to contribute to the betterment of others. And, I only hope that I can continue to contribute thanks to all of your support and partnership. Thank you.