



Beyond East and West: In Search of a Global Culture

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First of all, thank you to the organisers of this conference for inviting me to speak and for their kindness and hospitality. When I look at the four keynote speakers, I feel like I've walked through the twilight zone onto a sesame street set, where three of these things are each like the other, three of these things are kind of the same; but one of these things... well let's see if you can pick out which one is different and why.

Diversity is an increasing feature of NZ society, it's an increasing feature of western societies.

It's quite clear that migration patterns are from poorer countries to richer countries – people trying to escape poverty and corruption, seeking a better life for themselves and their children. These migration patterns provide a source of cheap labour for richer countries. For us, it's the Pacific Islands, and Asia – we are importing workers into the aged care sector, the agricultural sector, Christchurch rebuild.

Poorer countries are a source of talent for us – we try to take the best, keep out the poor, those deemed unsuccessful or considered a potential “drain” on our economy (unless of course we take them on temporary work visas for cheap labour). Does this exacerbate the divide between developed and developing countries?

In developing countries, we see exploitation of resources and labour, through a mixture of foreign “investment” and corruption. Example: chocolate and the use of child slave labour on the West Coast of Africa. (<http://www.slavefreechocolate.org/>, and I also strongly recommend the documentary film “Nothing Like Chocolate” by Kum Kum Bhavani). Despite full exposure of this practice and knowledge that all major companies continue to be complicit in it, people continue to buy chocolate from supermarket shelves.

We also see cultural imperialism happening in developing countries. Access to wealth means access to media & the ability to influence media. Those with wealth can afford to make more and distribute more media. People in developed countries have the leisure, the access to technology and opportunity to create self-made media. For the last few decades, people in developing countries have been absorbing the cultural norms and patterns of developed countries. They hear the music, see the stories, and absorb the latest trends; while we don't do anywhere near enough of the same when it comes to them.

But there is change, particularly through social media. In the last Gaza war, we could see pictures and on-the-ground reports directly through twitter of the devastation that was caused. Not the censored version through mainstream media, but direct and brutal pictures and words, as attacks were happening. The Arab spring: global audiences got the stories straight from the source, they no longer need to rely on an MSM filter, the decisions by corporate media about what information will sell well, what is highlighted, what is ignored.

And it's happening now with the refugee crisis in Europe. The situation in Syria has been critical for at least 4 years. The UN and other aid agencies have been trying to highlight the extreme levels of crisis. But finally, the reports of fleeing people drowning, dying in trucks as they desperately try to get out, have touched our collective social conscience.

As it is, we don't do diversity well. At the highest level of decision-making, we still do badly at any kind of diversity, especially in the private sector. And some people still cling to the myth that there is a level playing field and that the demographics that don't get through to the top fail because they are just not good enough, not smart enough.

We still don't do well at recognising that the make-up of our country has changed, and that we have to do things differently, or at the very





least, accept that other people do things differently and that our structures and institutions often don't serve them well. We continue to not recognise it, even though we've had decades of statistics in health, education, and the justice sector that show that some minority groups are doing particularly badly in society as it is currently structured.

I guess we can comfort ourselves with the fact that other countries do it a lot worse than us, and that includes both developing and developed countries, some with high levels of sectarian violence. A lot of that violence is drummed by political aspirants who quickly learn that drumming up hatred of a powerless minority has been and continues to be a successful tactic.

But the thing is that, at a global level, it is absolutely essential that we learn to do diversity a lot better. We can't afford this divisiveness. Who do such divisions profit? Who do they serve?

The arms industry. Multi-national corporations. The oil industry. Richer countries, or the elites within them.

These are the realities of climate change (and I'm assuming you know a little about the topic) – rising sea levels, more droughts meaning less food. More hurricanes and extreme weather events. The poor will get poorer, because those extremes hurt poorer societies more. Stronger structures mean greater chances of survival but those structures cost more. The already wealthy can afford better protection.

We already live in a world in which there is overuse and depletion of natural resources, depletion of the fishing stock. We already create way too much rubbish, especially the harmful non-biodegradable sort. We already know that the way we are living is unsustainable, and we know that it's causing problems with the climate. As the climate changes, the impacts of our current lifestyle will be much, much worse.

The irony is that we currently have enough food to feed everyone in the world, right now. And yet we allow 3.1 million children a year to die of poor nutrition, 21,000 a day.

[\[http://www.poverty.com/\]](http://www.poverty.com/)

That is our choice: our choice in the way we structure this world, in the governments we elect, in our purchasing choices, in the media we choose to watch, the clicks we make on the computer and the words we write in our social media spaces. (As an aside, if any of you haven't listened to Monica Lewinsky's TED talk, I strongly suggest you take the time to do so. Her plea that we "click with compassion" is a crucially important one).

The other side of this appalling poverty is the immense wealth of some individuals. And it suits their interests for us to be hating each other. It suits their interests to create this divide; this suspicion of the other. It suits their interests for us to think that our differences are insurmountable.

My contention is that it is time to move beyond these divisions to the realities of commonality. It is imperative that we do so, and in doing so, we build movements for change. There is no doubt that the groups we are fighting are powerful, well-financed and well-organised. There is no doubt that the kinds of changes we need to make are considerable and unpopular. If for no other reason than humans are resistant to change and if you don't believe that, I suggest you conduct an internet search on the words "change management". But also because many of these changes might make us worse off, might make life a little less comfortable and convenient.

The "Cassandra" view of the world, and one that global elites desperately want us to believe, is that it can't be done. It is in their interests that we feel powerless and fail to act. It is best if we are kept busy trying to make a living, distracted with the latest fashions and consumer goods, with celebrity gossip and weight loss strategies. It's best for them if the most powerful media organisations don't provide in-depth analysis of policies and problems.

And it's hard not to feel a strong sense of despair when we see the headlines in tabloid papers, when we see the unbalanced commentary, the lack of ability to hold power to account. We feel powerless when, after so many hundreds of thousands (if not millions) protested around the world against the invasion of Iraq, that invasion and occupation, that destruction went ahead. It's hard not to feel a frustrated anger as we watch those leaders who lied to us about weapons of mass destruction that never existed, escape any kind of accountability for their actions and the lives they have taken. And the awful fruits of their endeavours that we are witnessing today.



It's gutting to watch the extreme violence, the videos of beheadings, the erosion of basic rights, while the only response from other governments (including our own) seems to be "let's bomb them some more, that ought to solve the problem". Apparently it was Rita Mae Brown who wrote that the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again, expecting different results.

The easy path is the one that chooses to accept that there is no alternative, and that allows us to continue living our comfortable lives (at least those of us who can afford to do so, those who are still able to come under the definition of middle class).

But I refuse to accept that defeatist argument. All sense of decency, humanity, empathy and everything that is good about human natures screams against such fatalistic complacency. To me, the "Cassandra" option is a dereliction of our own duty to our fellow human being, to our future generations, and ultimately ourselves.

Losing hope is the biggest failure of a human being. I know what it's like to lose hope, on a personal level, and it's very much a first step towards losing the will to live. Very often we lose hope because of the circumstances we find ourselves in, some of which may be our own fault or we may have had no control at all.

For me, it is faith that sustains me. The certain knowledge that there is a God who watches our efforts and allows nothing to go to waste. The knowledge that we might never see any positive results from our efforts towards better things but God is there watching over us and rewarding the struggle, for it is the struggle that matters more than the end result.

For me the essence of faith is hope. Faith sustains hope, and so encourages us to be better, to keep trying even though we make mistakes and behave badly or negligently. Faith is about being weak and being forgiven; it's about picking yourself back up and trying again.

So, let's not give in to Cassandra and the predictions of certain doom. Nor is it acceptable to sit back and wait for change, wait for someone else to take up the burden. Because the responsibility is ours each and every one of us, individually and collectively.

Let's work as if we can make a difference, because if we do that, we might just succeed. And if we don't succeed, at least we'll know we did our best.

I find hope in social media and way we can connect to each other via various technological advances. I find hope in the various ways we are able to bypass tyranny and control. I find hope in the fact that the most fearsome of tyrants have been overthrown by their own people. I find hope in the everyday kindness that I see human beings show to each other. I find hope in all young people I see who are educated and aware, who come together to push for change. I find hope in smiles and hugs, even in tears. I find hope in the fact that we are all present here together at this time, on this day, caring about each other and about our fate. Humanity is worth fighting for, this planet and all the life on it is worth fighting for.

Successful movements are built on common values and common goals. What we need is a global movement, which means a global set of values, a global culture.

So what would a global culture look like? What are the things that matter? On the day this speech was due, I also had to complete a submission on a Government consultation relating to legislative responses to family violence. One of the questions was "How would guiding principles affect how the Domestic Violence Act and other legislation is implemented? What principles would you suggest?" And I thought that some of the principles I put down would be a good starting point:

- everyone has the right to live in dignity, to have their person and their mana respected
- everyone has the right to be consulted in any decision that affects them, and to have their views taken seriously
- everyone should be free to leave a relationship, if they want to
- solutions must take into account cultural and religious factors that may impact the well-being of the victim
- solutions must make the situation of the victim and any children better, not worse



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights might be another place to look. As someone who has been trained as a human rights facilitator, that definitely appeals to me. But even if we don't take all the articles, and stick to a few, we should be able to make progress. Concepts such as justice, self-determination, inclusion, removal of poverty.

A global culture is one where we learn how to deal with disagreement. One of my favourite books on this topic is "Adab al ikhtilaf" (The Etiquettes of Disagreement) by Egyptian author Yusuf Qardawi. While he deals with the issue from a religious perspective, using the examples of early Muslim scholars and the way they respected each other even when they had differing opinions, I think those examples are universally applicable. Learning skills around negotiation and mediation should definitely be compulsory subjects at a global level, as important as maths, science, reading and writing.

This is (part of) my vision of a global culture, and I suspect it would be quite similar to yours. The problem is not so much in determining what these common values should be – our predecessors managed to come up with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after all. The problem is in enforcing them, and in way that is beneficial rather than harmful.

To me, this is where the biggest challenge lies. This is where we desperately need leadership and guidance. The most powerful tools we have in this struggle are education, persuasion, critical thinking and patience. But greater than all of those is faith, the strong belief that we can make a difference

Where do we start? With organisation, with making connections. We do the opposite of what the warmongers do. We support and get behind those who are already successful in making the changes we want to see. We build networks and publicise – in evangelical terms, we spread the word!

We already know that efforts of past generations and even the efforts we have made in our own lifetimes are bearing fruit. Research by Steven Pinker shows that the world is becoming less violent.

We know that producers and retailers do respond to pressure from consumers, and that they have made changes to move towards more environmentally sustainable methods and products, as a result of changing attitudes. The more we push for solutions, the more likely it is that research and development budgets will go towards the solutions we need.

The proof is there that we can make a difference. We know how to do it. There's no excusing for giving up or being complacent. Let's keep moving forward.

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Anjum has been living in Hamilton for 42 years, arriving at the age of 5 in 1972. She has done all her schooling here and has a Bachelor and Masters in Management Studies from the University of Waikato. Both of her children were born at Waikato Hospital. She is a fully qualified chartered accountant with 20 years of practical experience providing services to small and medium size businesses and farming operations. She also serves voluntarily as treasurer and/or board member for a variety of not-for-profit organisations including Free FM (Hamilton's community access radio station), the Waikato Interfaith Council, and Ethnic New Zealand Trust. She has currently taken on a second job as the Strategic Manager of Shama (Hamilton Ethnic Women's Centre), an organisation that provides social support services for ethnic women and their families. This includes family violence services, advocacy, settlement support and lifeskills classes. She is a political and human rights activist, a feminist, and a person who works continuously on social and cultural change with the aim of creating a more socially just and inclusive society.