

TAKING
RESPONSIBILITY
FOR CREATING THE WORLD
WE WANT TO LIVE IN

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TAKING RESPONSIBILITY
FOR CREATING THE WORLD WE WANT TO LIVE IN

To My Mother, Helen
Who Brought Me Into This Life

To My Wife, Carol
Who Keeps Me Attuned to the Realities of This Life

To My Daughter, Bessie
Who Makes This Life a Joy

And to My Friend, Rob
Who Helped Me Hone My Feather
So That This Book Might Read a Little Better

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INTRODUCTION

From childhood each of us strives to develop values to guide us as we navigate through life. We create within us an ideal – or picture – of how we and our world should be that we develop from our experience and from what we've been told. Then we interpret the meaning of each passing moment based on that ideal. For example, we may think that our world should be a peaceful or fair place, and we hold an image of how this would look in our minds. We then expect to experience happiness when we or our world meet our expectations, and anticipate unhappiness when they do not.

Our ideals for how other people should act are based on what we want for ourselves. We each want respect. We want to be free to express ourselves. We seek confidence. We want clean air and water. Thus we consider respect, self-expression, confidence, and actions likely to move us toward a cleaner and safer world to be important.

Our highest values are those that we believe to be the ones that guide our lives. We may think that we value human life. We may say that we support the rights of people to be free to express themselves, or to make choices, or to pursue happiness or their goals. We may believe that we are compassionate and that we respect others and the world around us. But when we honestly watch our actions we might discover that what we do often is in conflict with our stated values. We may find that we live in two worlds: that of our higher values and that of our everyday – or functional – values, and that our actions often differ from what we say we believe. As we observe those around us we may find that their actions also often are different from their stated values. Yet it is our actions – rather than our values – that have the greatest impact. The state of our world is largely the result of what human beings do rather than what they say or think they do.

Clarifying our values is a challenge, but bringing them to bear in daily situations requires a still greater commitment. We use words to describe what we think is important – such as respect or freedom of expression – but if the words we use are to have real meaning we must determine how our values look and feel in the world. For example, what is respect between people really like? How do people act when they are respectful toward others or themselves? How does respect between individuals feel? How does it look or feel to be free? As we become more clear about these things we can begin to see how our actions do or do not reflect our values. We can then ask ourselves what we can do to bring our actions in line with what we say we believe. Talking or writing about our values is not the same as living them. We create our world through our actions, and ultimately, the world we create is the one in which we each must live.

If we want the world to be a place where people respect each other, for example, we might ask ourselves what we can do to create more respect in our everyday lives. Do our actions contribute toward this purpose or are we creating a world – both personally and as a society – that contributes to the disrespect or degradation of human life and our planet? We might think that we respect the rights of people to make choices about the direction of their lives, yet undermine that value when we manipulate others to support what we believe. We might think that we respect our environment yet contribute toward making

our world less habitable by contributions of trash and pollution. We may not be able to control the actions of others, but we each can learn to bring our own actions more fully into line with the values that we say we support.

As we become better at expressing our values through our actions we can bring them to bear in more frequently in our lives. Every situation is different, but we can learn to look at each new moment as an opportunity to live what we believe. If respect for others and our world is important, we can ask ourselves how we best can bring respect into our interactions with our others and our environment. And how do we move toward bringing this quality into the actions of the governments that represent us?

Keeping focused on our values is difficult when others seem to work against them. But every situation brings unique challenges. As we become more clear about our principles and how they can be lived in the world, we become better at keeping them in focus, regardless of what those around us say or do. If respect is one of our priorities, do we respect the right of others to disagree with us? Do we respect those who show little respect for us? Do we respect the wishes of others to live in a way that may be in conflict with our values? Do we support our families and friends in developing their own values or do we try to impose our beliefs on them? As we answer these and similar questions we begin to see how our everyday actions move our world closer to – or farther from – the kind of place we want it to be.

The expression of our values goes beyond our interactions with others. If respect is one of our primary values, we must extend it to our interactions with all aspects of our environment, including the material and natural worlds. We must pay attention not only to how we treat people, but to the rest of the world as well.

When we watch ourselves and others closely we begin to see that we all share the same essential priorities – at least in what we want from the world. We all have the same basic material desires for food, shelter and comfort. We all want compassion, understanding, and enjoyment in our lives. We each hope to bring a sense of meaning to our existence. But often we feel isolated and that our actions lead nowhere. We're tempted to give up on ever seeing a world where our values are fulfilled. Yet in every moment – including this one – we choose between focusing on our shortcomings and on those of the world around us, or on how to move our world in the direction that we would like to see it go.

Actions are more likely than words to convince others of our commitment to our values. We may have thoughts about how to improve our lives or make the world a better place, but be caught in indecision because we doubt that anything we do can make a difference. It takes courage to act in a way that reflects our values, but we must begin at some point. We can ask ourselves if we are expressing our priorities by our actions as well as by our words. Do our actions show that we value other human beings? Do we treat our surroundings in a way that helps to make our world a place where we want to live? In our work situation, do we consider the long-term as well as short-term results of our policies and actions? Do we commit ourselves to working with others to promote our values? Do we promote physical well-being for ourselves and others in the areas of prevention, diet,

and exercise? As we begin to see past our self-imposed limitations, we gradually become stronger in our confidence in our values and the actions that reflect them. We may not see immediate changes as the results of any one thing we do, but we will gain greater strength and clarity as we become more committed to our true priorities. If everyone thought and acted this way, the effect on our planet would be profound.

Beneath our values and our efforts to express them there is yet a deeper purpose. What we seek as a result of our actions is an elusive quality known by many names – including happiness, fulfillment and satisfaction. These may seem like different concepts but they all express the same essential feeling. Ultimately we are after something that words cannot adequately describe, but that is nevertheless real. This quality is always in our consciousness yet seems to be perpetually just beyond our reach. Whether our intention is to make ourselves wealthy or make the world a better place, each of us is looking to experience this feeling. We may think that we want only to make others happy, or we might believe that we have lost interest in others and seek to satisfy only ourselves. Yet ultimately the goal for each of us is the same: the experience of satisfaction that we hope our actions will bring.

As we clarify our priorities and pursue them we assume that fulfillment will follow. Yet when we get what we think we want we often remain dissatisfied. We are surprised to find that happiness does not automatically result from gaining possessions, entering into relationships, pursuing leisure activities, or even changing the world. Fulfillment does not necessarily follow from making ourselves look good or having others like us. This is because happiness is different from getting the things we want – it is the feeling that we hope will result from getting what we want. Although usually unaware of it, we each have already learned how to cultivate this feeling and, alternately, to deny it to ourselves. The feeling we want is always within us waiting to appear, but is held captive by our belief that we cannot experience fulfillment until our expectations are met. As we learn to see that we are responsible for our own experience of satisfaction we can begin to allow this feeling to develop within us.

We can allow the feeling of satisfaction directly into our lives, rather than waiting for circumstances to bring it to us. We may try to achieve it by our actions, yet if it remains only a goal for the future – or something we remember from the past – it can never be a reality in the present. It is only in this moment that we can actually do anything, including allowing ourselves to experience the feeling of fulfillment that we most want. We can do nothing in the future or in the past.

We go through life with the belief that satisfaction is always in some other place or time. But our ongoing thoughts about what might be – or what might have been – are our ticket to continual dissatisfaction. Sometimes we seek extreme circumstances just to bring us an experience of this moment – extreme emotion, extreme passion, or even extreme pain. Yet fulfillment ultimately lies in our willingness to experience this moment – the one we are in.

We only can know our experience of reality – reality itself remains unknowable. Our words can only describe what we see or hear. Nevertheless we can learn to recognize and cultivate our real goal in life, which is a deep feeling of satisfaction. Continually seeking satisfaction is what keeps us from it. As we become more clear about this we can allow this feeling to enter our consciousness more frequently and bring it into our interactions with the world.

At the core of our search for values is valuing life itself – in our own lives and all of the life that surrounds us. It is only when we remember this and allow ourselves this experience – regardless of what others say or do – that we confirm our own worth as human beings. Others may praise or criticize us, but what is most important is affirming our own value as a human being. When we value and appreciate others – and our world – we also experience our value. Thus our highest priority becomes to honor the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of each human being as well as every part of this universe of which we are fortunate enough to be a part.

What we give is what we get. We experience respect when we respect others and our world, and find compassion in the act of showing compassion. Yet often we believe that what we do to others and our surroundings has no effect on us. We usually consider our separateness from our surroundings as a given. Both seem true until we take a closer look. We live most of our lives believing in divisions – between ourselves and the world, good and bad, light and dark, happiness and unhappiness – but this view fails to reflect the real world, which is not divided into segments as is the world that we create in our minds. Our divisions of the world are convenient for our immediate purposes but are not the same as the reality that lies beyond our concepts. Thus our ideas about the world cannot provide a reliable road map for how to find the satisfaction we really want. We can find many contradictory qualities in the world if we seek them, yet the reality of our world – and of ourselves – is beyond these dichotomies. When simply open to observing the world as it comes before us – as one moment follows another – we experience that we are connected to every person and every thing. Genuine satisfaction consists of recognizing and reclaiming our connectedness to our world and thus to ourselves.

As we learn to value and respect who we are – with our ups and downs, our sunny and dark sides, our contradictions and quirks – our sense of ourselves and what we expect from our interactions with the world alters dramatically. We no longer rely on others and our circumstances to meet our expectations so that we can experience the satisfaction we seek. Instead we learn to cultivate our innermost ability to feel – much like a fountain that we allow to flow from within us out into the world. As we become more secure in our ability to do this we begin to bring an experience of fulfillment into our daily lives. This leads to a sense of confidence and satisfaction that underlies our actions. Allowing ourselves this feeling is the ultimate success because it is what we continually seek, usually without realizing that our own fulfillment is in our power.

When I interact with you I choose whether to honor who you are. I make this decision in my mind and then it is expressed in my actions. My feeling toward you can be expressed in a myriad of ways – friendly or unfriendly words, gestures such as smiles or frowns,

body language such as tension or relaxation, touch or lack of touch. All of these are but outward signs of the regard or lack of regard I hold toward you. Yet more importantly, if I isolate myself from you in my mind I create an experience of isolation for myself, and if I create a sense of connection with you in my mind I experience a sense of connection within.

As we watch our interactions with the world it becomes clear that the experience of happiness is an entity unto itself, not the result of any particular event. It is a feeling that can be expressed in our interactions, but is not dependent on it. Pursuing happiness doesn't lead to it – it is an experience that we have when we allow it to flow through us. We can learn to bring it into our lives instead of hoping that our lives will bring it to us. Happiness then becomes the full experience of our moods and feelings in each moment rather than a goal. Fulfillment is no longer tied to conditions that we have set but becomes a function of our everyday living.

There are times when we set our minds in a place of isolation from the world and nothing seems to make us happy. Our experience then fulfills our negative expectations. When we do this we guarantee ourselves chronic dissatisfaction. Every experience falls short of the impossible expectations we have set. But when we realize that this is a part of the human condition – as reflected in us – we can renew our sense of compassion for who we are and move back to the underlying feeling we seek.

This little book is about the feeling that lies beneath our values and hopes, and how it can be used as a guide for creating the world we want for ourselves and the generations that follow. It is a feeling that starts within us and emanates outward, rather than coming from the outside. It is possible to identify this feeling – which is our ultimate goal – and bring it directly into our lives. This allows us to move beyond the belief that what we really want is perpetually somewhere else in place or time. If we are always seeking happiness – in relationships, work, religion or other places – we are stating that it is not available to us in the present. We cannot seek and experience happiness at the same time. In each moment – including this one – we choose whether or not to allow ourselves a full experience of ourselves and our universe – including our thoughts, fears, and emotions. This is the most essential human choice. Seeing that we have this choice is the beginning of taking responsibility for the quality of our lives and the state of the world around us.

As we learn to choose what we really want we no longer must perpetually await that moment when we or our world meets our expectations so that we can experience it. As we begin to live in a feeling of connectedness with our world this becomes a new barometer of what our values should be and how we should live. We allow ourselves to have the feeling we seek and it becomes – more and more – an integral part of who we are. Our world takes on a different look. Rather than struggling to bring ourselves more respect, our feeling of respect for ourselves and others guides us in our interactions. We no longer seek peace, but we allow peace to well up within us, which then accompanies our quest to bring peace to our world. Life becomes an expression of our fulfillment rather than a continual and impatient search for it.

When we begin to take responsibility for our own happiness we are no longer caught in an urgent need for the world to change. We no longer hold the view that our satisfaction is dependent on the conditions of our lives or of the world. We fully participate in life as an expression of our fulfillment. We become a more effective agent for change as we no longer demand that the world change. We become willing to accept and express who we find ourselves to be in each passing moment.

As we depend less on the world to live up to our values we begin to increasingly value the world. We are less affected by insecurity and less inclined to resent others and the world when they don't meet our expectations. We become more effectiveness at pursuing our goals when we no longer think we need the permission of others to establish our value. When we see the positive and good in ourselves we tend to see these qualities more in the world around us. We are more likely to allow ourselves to move beyond the polarities of good and bad, beauty and ugliness – in ourselves and others. The world is no longer black and white but appealing in its nuances. Our problems become more solvable because we see the common human qualities in ourselves and others. We still make choices, but they are made based more upon what we see with our eyes open rather than from fear of what might happen. Our higher values – such as respect and compassion – become more of a presence in our lives because we bring them into what we do rather than waiting for them to be brought to us.

Without values our lives and society would be without direction. Our values provide guidance in a world that often seems incomprehensible if not downright hostile. Yet holding rigidly to preset principles can undermine our ability to value life itself and participate fully in the process of living. Values serve us best when we use them as guidelines, rather than as an unbending framework into which we try to force every person and situation. We are best guided by a shared vision of where we want to go rather than a suit of armor that may have helped us forge through our problems of the past but that no longer fits the realities of today. If our society is to have rules and laws that reflect our real values they must include a flexibility that allows us to remain true to our most essential principles in each and every moment.

Again using respect as an example: as we become clear about what respect feels like the feeling itself will guide us. When we fall short of respecting ourselves, others, and our world we can begin to recognize that something is not quite right. We can allow ourselves to return to this most essential value in both our thoughts and our actions. We can remember that respect is important not just to us but to everyone. The more we are able to do this the more we become convinced that it is indeed possible to put ourselves – and our world – back on track.

We each share the responsibility for the state of our world and where it is heading. We want respectful interactions with our world so as to bring respect to ourselves. When we are clear that our priorities and those of others are the essentially the same we are more likely to be able to bring them into play. We improve our chances of establishing a more solid common direction. Meeting our goals depends on clarifying and keeping our eyes

on them rather than on arguing about the right or wrong way to get there. We can move in the direction of what we seek only if we keep a clear inner focus on our target.

What I write here serves as a reminder for me of what I consider to be the priorities for my own life. I often fall short of the principles described here, yet this exercise is worthwhile to me because it provides greater clarity for my own direction. Hopefully you will also find these guidelines of value. At the deepest level we each already know what we really want for ourselves and our planet. What is left is for us to engage in dialogue and work together toward clarifying and creating the world we envision, rather than drifting toward a world that fails to reflect the best within us. We do this by maintaining our focus on the direction we want to go rather than on our shortcomings and those of others. When others refuse to join us in that effort, we can continue to work toward the world we envision with those who share our view of universal respect until others come on board. This guide will hopefully be a useful tool toward that end.

What I have outlined in these pages is based upon my observation and reflection on the world around me to this point in time, but my viewpoint is continually evolving. At some level I know that the essential person I am has not been altered by years of experience – both good and bad – and is unlikely to change, although the way I see myself and world is continually in flux. Recognizing and valuing myself continues to be a priority as I proceed through life. As I improve at this I become better at extending this recognition to others. As I am better able to honor who I find myself to be I become better at honoring my planet and its inhabitants.

Words generally point backwards – they invoke our experience from the past – but I would hope that the words I put on these pages allow us to examine a new perspective of what is possible for our present and our future. What I write here may challenge us to see the world a little differently from the view to which we have become accustomed, but I do hope that you will find the diversion worth your while.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE SELF

We are all visionaries. We each carry within us a picture of the world as we believe it should be and continually compare our vision with the reality that we see before us. We hold ideals in our minds for our interactions with others, our work, and our play, and believe that our contentment in life depends on whether our everyday experience meets our expectations. We imagine a peaceful world where we and those around us are secure – a place where our needs are met and we live in harmony – and we long for the inner contentment that we believe such a world would bring us. We want to live in a world where people are respected and valued so that we can experience being respected and valued, and we want a compassionate world so that we can experience compassion. We differ only in whether we believe our vision to be a possibility for this lifetime or that it is more likely to happen in a world yet to come.

We use our visions both to guide and torment ourselves. When we focus on our hopes they provide us with a picture of a more satisfying life or better world. We experience the fulfillment that we believe our visions would bring us as we hold them in our minds. But we experience dissatisfaction when we contemplate what we believe is lacking in our selves or world. Comparing things with how we think they should be leaves us with a feeling of discontentment. At times our minds also traverse the gamut from the highest places to the lowest independently of the circumstances of our lives. Often we experience and express discomfort - and then contentment - irrespective of our interactions with our surroundings.

At birth we begin a separation from the only world we had known until that time, a place where we and our surroundings seemed as one. Then we are thrust into a world where we must struggle to get what we want – where we learn to think of ourselves as separate beings who rely on our environment to meet our needs. Yet there remains within us a conflict between these two ways of seeing ourselves. We long for that time and place of connection to the world where we believe that we were nurtured and our needs were met. But only when engaged in a struggle to make our way in the world do we become truly human.

We start with an innocent view of our world and ourselves. Blame and guilt are at first unknown. We simply try to learn the rules that we must follow to get our needs met. We find that a cry usually works to get us fed or changed, and a smile conveys contentment in between times of need. For most of us, the adults around us at first welcome our spontaneous expression of feeling. We believe ourselves loved and appreciated for who we are.

As we mature, our minds are open to any teachings that come our way. Our views of ourselves and the world are shaped as we adopt the values of those around us. We learn the standards by which we are judged and will be expected to judge ourselves and others. We begin to believe that there are right and wrong ways to look and to act and that parts of us are acceptable and others are not. We lose much of our spontaneity as we try to look

good or perform well. We feel valued when we learn what we are expected to absorb, and not valued when we learn these things slowly or not at all.

Gradually we develop our concepts of ourselves and our world. We learn what our society values – beauty, strength, or intelligence for example – and we compare ourselves with the images that these words bring to mind. We judge ourselves as good at times, and at other times bad. We see ourselves as successes and then as failures. We believe ourselves attractive one moment and unattractive the next, strong and then weak, smart and then incompetent, worthwhile then worthless, happy then unhappy, kind and then cruel – each quality taking its turn in our minds as part of our ever-changing image of who we are. We become confident in some of our skills and doubtful about others. We may become convinced that we have a right to satisfaction in life, or that the world seems unlikely ever to be a satisfying place to live.

Late in our youth, as we struggle to create a concrete image of ourselves and others, we find the inconsistent nature of those around us – as well as of ourselves – to be troublesome. The concepts that we constructed to help us understand the world no longer seem to fit, but we believe it is the world itself that disappoints us. As we become adults we continue to hold expectations that result in disillusionment. Our families, friends, co-workers, and even our idols fall short of our ideals – and at times we revel in this discovery.

As we forge our self-concepts we try to control our actions to match our emerging idea of who we are. We try to live up to our image of ourselves, yet we carry within us an intuition that this is not our entire self. We have a vague recollection that there is more to us than we or others see, and we hope that someday we will receive recognition and respect for who we really are. We understand at some level that our real self is more than the role we have learned to play as a member of a race, religion, sex, vocation, or any other group with which we have come to identify. But we are fearful to act in a way that differs from the person we have created ourselves to be – whether it be a woman, a man, a black, a white, an oriental, a Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, an athlete, a construction worker, a college professor, or any other role to which we have assigned ourselves.

Most of us learn to present ourselves to the world as one individual with a consistent viewpoint despite the many competing views that remain hidden beneath the surface. We fear being seen as outside of the carefully constructed self-image that we have created. At those times when we believe ourselves successful we are able to convince ourselves and others of our abilities and talents despite internal doubts and fears. Yet we each carry within us a frail sense of self that remains vulnerable to the judgments of others. At these times our real or imagined weaknesses spring up and threaten our idea of who we are. We fear we're not handsome enough, strong enough, rich enough, or smart enough; or that we eat, drink, or work too much or too little, or perhaps are too often angry. We remain concerned about what other people think of us, and are stung by what we perceive as their criticisms. Although we may defend ourselves against what we see as the accusations of others, their views often contribute to our own self-judgments.

Once we have established our concept of ourselves and the world we usually act as if we know who we are, what we like, and what is right and wrong. Although my emotions may pull me in many directions and I may be plagued by self-doubt at times, I'll pretend to others – and often to myself – that I am consistent in my values and actions. Our ideas about the world and ourselves also influence what we see. When I believe that the world is a safe and friendly place, I will act confidently and my interactions will confirm the safety of the world in my mind. When I believe the world to be dangerous or threatening, I will find it difficult to fully trust anyone or anything. If convinced that I am a success, I will think that I can succeed at whatever I try and will not allow my shortcomings to affect my self-image. But if I believe myself a failure, no number of triumphs will convince me that I can succeed.

Although we may convey the appearance of confidence, we each host emotions that we believe are forced upon us by others or events. We find ourselves acting upon anger, fear or jealousy in spite of our attempts at self-control. Denying our feelings may lead to depression, which further undermines our confidence. Yet unwelcome emotions – such as fear or anger – still present themselves, claiming to represent our real self, which leave us confused and at times unable to function. These emotions often seek to run our lives and to express themselves with or without our consent. Our efforts to suppress the feelings that we don't want others to see can cause us to seek comfort in distracting activities, possessions, people, food, or substances such as alcohol or drugs. But these diversions never provide permanent relief.

Our enthusiasm for living often is dampened by a world that seems cruel and uncaring. At times we wonder how we will get through life or even through the day. We blame others or circumstances for causing our discomfort. Our finances, events of nature, the people we encounter, our families, and even our friends seem to work against us. We blame those close to us and those at a distance for failing us. At times we blame ourselves. We believe that changing others, the world, or ourselves will bring us the contentment we seek. Perhaps we need to be rid of those who seem to cause our unhappiness. We crave the compassion and understanding that we believe we once had, but that now remain only a vague memory in our minds.

As we compare our view of the world with how we believe it should be we set ourselves up for a rough ride between fulfillment and despair. We find ourselves batted about by fate and rarely consider that our ever-changing frame of mind may be based on our habit of finding that people and things – including ourselves – always fall short of our standards. Yet our perennial expectations remain unreachable. Our efforts to improve our lives and world may bring temporary relief but never lead to long-term satisfaction. No matter what we achieve or how much we change there is always something else that – in our minds – stands between us and happiness. We may want close personal relationships, rewarding work, or a world at peace, but reality rarely meets our expectations for long. We torment ourselves and those around us as we judge our world and ourselves. No one is immune to these workings of our minds – not the poorest and weakest among us, not even the most powerful and wealthy.

We want the world to change – or at least for it to treat us better – so that we can experience happiness. But even after things seem to improve, our inner turmoil eventually returns. Thus changing the world or the circumstances of our lives never brings lasting satisfaction. We want the feeling that we hope will result from these changes, yet we continually return to our thoughts of what is lacking. And soon after those times when we experience peace, our minds again become magnets for the negative thoughts that we have become expert at bringing to ourselves. We may experience happiness for a while but soon return to the state of seeking it. We continue to deny ourselves the feeling we most want except during those brief times when we decide it justified by events.

We may find that we experience contentment as we participate in a rewarding interaction with another, win a competition, improve our finances, or enjoy a sunset. But at times we also experience contentment independently of circumstances – for what seems like no reason at all. This happens during those times when we neglect to compare our world and selves with how we think they should be. We temporarily stop seeking happiness because we have the experience we want, which is simply being present with what is happening. The moment that we stop seeking happiness is when we experience it. A quiet sense of peace overcomes us. We suspend judgment toward the events of our lives in that place and time.

Soon, though, we again begin to compare our lives and world with our visions. We find that we are critical toward ourselves and others for how we look and act. The world falls short of our expectations. Thus we fluctuate between appreciating the fullness of each moment and tormenting ourselves about how we think things should be – between good moods and bad, fulfillment and self-doubt, happiness and despair, pleasure and pain. A state of long-term happiness seems only a fantasy. No matter how positive a situation we may find ourselves in, we will in our minds – sooner or later – dwell on what is missing. And no matter how painful our existence, our minds will at times return to the pleasure of simple interaction with the world. These internal shifts happen when we are actively engaged in life as well as when we simply sit and do very little.

We seek an experience of stability – of being present with ourselves and the world – yet our minds are perpetually in flux. We seem happy one moment and unhappy the next, confident one moment and doubtful the next. Yet it is not the fluctuating nature of our minds that causes our discomfort, nor the habit of our thoughts to pull us down to the depths of our being and back again. Our discontent is based in our expectation that we be consistent and stable, and in our assumption that we should have long been purged of our inconsistency and insecurity. Our discomfort is based in our belief that we cannot be forgiven for the imperfect beings that we repeatedly find ourselves to be. Our problem is not our turmoil, but the expectation that we should be free from it. We believe that our struggle shows that we are not worthwhile as human beings. Yet when we review our history – both as individuals and as a race – we find that struggle is inherent in our nature. Yet, if we so choose, we can at any moment – including this one – begin to

respect and honor the reality of who we find ourselves to be with all of our shortcomings – those of the past, the present, and even the future.

As we acknowledge the fluctuating nature of our minds – and appreciate ourselves as we are despite this – we become less likely to blame the circumstances of our lives or the world for granting or denying us happiness. We become more aware that the fulfillment of our visions will not lead to long-term euphoria and that our fears will not condemn us to a perpetual internal hell. As we become more willing to be who we are – and to go where our highs and lows take us – we attain a deeper understanding of our nature, which is to move between a connection to the world and withdrawal. We experience the forgiveness and compassion that we once thought could only come from the outside. This is a feeling – not a concept – that only we can allow to ourselves. It is a calmness, a presence of mind, and a willingness to be present to which words – including these words – can only allude.

When young, we sought empathy from others as we went through the fluctuating moods to which our minds invariably brought us. As we merged into adulthood, we became disillusioned when we realized that those around us did not have the answers we wanted to the enigmas of life, and that we must leave our world of innocence behind. And now, when we descend into disappointment and anger with our world or selves – sometimes for good reasons and at times for what seems like no reason at all – we may hope for compassion from others, but we can only experience compassion when we allow it to ourselves. To do this we must move beyond the concept of compassion as something that comes only from the outside. Only we can allow ourselves the experience of compassion, and when we do this we give ourselves permission to have the positive and negative feelings to which we endlessly return, yet our shortcomings no longer diminish our value as a person. We gain forgiveness for the angry parts of ourselves that seem poised to pull us out of control and the ugly parts of ourselves that we often seek to deny.

Bringing compassion to ourselves opens our eyes to the multifaceted reality of who we are. As we do this we are more able and willing to accept who we find ourselves to be in each moment. Acknowledging and accepting both our weaknesses and strengths provides not only greater self-awareness but increases our self-confidence and control over our actions. It allows us to move forward confidently into the future without a fear of being overwhelmed by the instabilities that seem to loom up in our minds from our past.

When unwilling to allow ourselves the anger, fear, grief, or even joy that seeks to surge through us from one moment to the next we freeze that emotion – which then becomes stronger in its attempt to express itself. When our thoughts and feeling stay focused on what we believe others or the world do to us – or might do to us – it keeps us from the full experience of each new moment. Every new experience vies for our attention, yet we keep ourselves from being able to function in the present by attaching our minds to what we believe happened to us in the past and to our fears of the future. Our thoughts create barriers between ourselves and a world that we believe fails to understand us, but our barriers also keep us from being able to fully interact with our world. In the act of

distancing ourselves from the world we move farther from the experience of connection to it, which is what we really want.

There is a spontaneity within each of us that seeks to respond to the ongoing events of each moment. Compassion toward the totality of who we are – which includes each of our feelings and thoughts as they come forward, as well as our fluctuations of mood and expression – allows us to participate fully in each experience that comes our way, and then move on to the next experience, and still on to the next as it unfolds. Judging and blocking those internal forces that continually seek expression causes them to build up in a quest for recognition. The denial of our emotions accumulates within us toward greater anger and resentment.

My ideas of the world are based on the information that is brought to me by my senses – what I hear, see, smell and feel – and my interpretation of what my senses bring me. My concepts of myself and others are shaped by a combination of countless experiences. The world I live in is very different from yours. Thus there cannot be any one right or wrong way to see people or events. There are at least as many ways to experience the world as there are people. There also cannot be only one right or wrong way to act in any situation because each situation is as unique as we are. When we respect our perceptions of the world – as well as our thoughts and feelings – we are at the same time respectful toward ourselves and the world around us. It is not others or the world that bring us an experience of respect, but our own willingness to allow it to ourselves in each moment of our lives.

Although we hold within us a vision of peace, our primary goal is not the appearance of peace in the world or our individual lives, but its experience. The world cannot bring us what we do not allow to ourselves. When we pursue peace we experience discontentment as we insist that it is perpetually in some other time or place. But the state of peace is already the most essential part of who we are. It perpetually lies within awaiting permission to be felt. It underlies every human hope and aspiration, but is always present and accessible. From the viewpoint of peace there is nothing that we need to make happen – it is available to us in every moment, including this one.

We might tell ourselves that we want more possessions, better relationships, or a world free of conflict. But at any time we can ask ourselves: "Beneath what I think I want, what is it I really want?" When we go to a deeper level and ask ourselves why we want these things, we might say it is for greater security, self-esteem, or inner peace. We find ourselves moving from visions for how we want the world to be toward a more profound understanding of what we really want. When we go one step further we might find that we are seeking to experience a feeling that words cannot adequately describe. The best we can do is to use words such as happiness, satisfaction or self-recognition. But this limitation doesn't make our goal any less real. Despite the limits of our language we can move closer to identifying and experiencing what we most want. As we clarify our true goal – the experience of peace – our view of the world and what we want from it changes. We no longer need to possess things or change others or ourselves to be happy. Our priority becomes simply touching that part deep within us that has long been ignored

and bringing this feeling back into our everyday experience. This has been our real goal all along.

We can bring validity to each of our thoughts and emotions as they move through us while knowing that they are not the totality who we are – they are but an expression of a part of us. We may believe that anger, for example, results from the failure of others – or of ourselves - to meet our expectations or provide us recognition. We experience disconnection from others as we blame them for our discomfort, and this brings us pain and a sense of isolation. We find that our painful emotions are stronger than us and that they move through us at will. But as we learn to value ourselves as we are – with the emotions that we like and those we don't like – we fully experience each feeling as it comes our way and we begin to heal.

Experiencing our feelings is different than the concept of experiencing them. We may think we feel fear, for example, yet the actual emotion that goes through is unique in place and time. The same is true for anger, sadness, depression, and every other feeling that – when we pay attention – we find to be an entity unto itself. Simply watching and allowing ourselves to go through each feeling as it comes to us brings us a level of experience beyond words. When truly felt at the core of our being – rather than described – each of our experiences merges in an unbroken succession with the next.

Opening ourselves to our feelings as they occur allows them to move through us. Bringing compassion to the darkness we find within permits us to experience it and then let it continue on its journey as it opens a space for the light that invariably follows. We do this by witnessing the reality of each emotion rather than imposing a concept on it. We may wait in vain for others to confirm or validate who we are yet we can at any time – including this moment – experience ourselves as worthwhile individuals with all of our emotions and thoughts. When ignored they continue to knock at the door of our minds – like children vying for our attention – until we acknowledge that they exist. Rather than being a victim of the world and our own thoughts, we can become the bringer of compassion to ourselves. Rather than an angry person we can become the one who confirms our value as human beings. We can allow our emotions – both negative and positive – to flow through us as we begin to recognize them simply as being a part of our human nature.

Regardless of the difficulties of our lives we can be kind to ourselves. When we emerge from self-condemnation we move toward the feeling of appreciation that we seek. Condemning ourselves for any reason only makes us less accepting of who and how we are and makes us more likely to continue the same thoughts and actions in the future. Rather than bringing more darkness to our darkness we can begin to bring light – or forgiveness – to who we find ourselves to be. This is the only real change from our habit of perpetually thinking that we must be different. As we do this we see the good within us. We see ourselves for the valuable human beings that we really are.

We might call the compassionate place within us the higher self. The lower self – born of our perceived disconnection with the world – will continually try to have its way but is

never satisfied for long. Regardless of what we may think that we have learned our emotions will always try to gain dominion. Then we can once again allow that place of compassion within us to shine on our compulsions. But compassion can redeem us only as an experience, not as a concept. When this happens the higher self forgives our weaknesses. It returns us to a genuine self-love and greater self-understanding as it touches us. When we allow ourselves to experience peace – despite the flaws and anxieties that we and all humans share – our vision for peace becomes a lived reality.

We fear the pain of isolation that our negative feelings might bring, yet it is our fear of repeating our pain from the past that keeps us from being able to live fully in the present. What we most want is to be able to feel where we previously failed to allow ourselves to feel; to breathe where we previously blocked ourselves from breathing; and to simply be in a way that we rarely allow ourselves to be. Yet these words – feeling, breathing, being – and any others can only point to where we want to go. We begin to go there when we ask ourselves: "What is the feeling we really want?" and allow ourselves to have the experience beneath these words.

We may see ourselves as a gentle and caring person who rejects anger and all other parts of us that we consider negative, or as an angry person who indulges in continual self-expression, but we all still want essentially the same thing – acknowledgment and acceptance for who we are. We may have given up on getting this from others or resent the world for not having given it to us. Changing ourselves still fails to bring us long-term satisfaction, as does letting out our feelings with full force. Gaining more control over the world via power or wealth – as well as rejecting the world – are equally futile paths. But as we fully embrace ourselves – with the emotions and thoughts that we have in each new moment, including our fears, anger, anxieties, hatred and every other manifestation of our discomfort – we at last begin to experience the nurturance we seek.

To have an ongoing appreciation for every new moment of life we must go beyond the temptation to turn each new insight into a concept. Our concepts are the primary means by which we understand ourselves and our world, and they often provide direction. Yet to bring meaning to our ever-changing experience, we must penetrate to a deeper level. Compassion and respect, for example, are words that represent some of our essential values. But it is the feeling behind these words that gives them the potential to transform us. Simply relying on these – or any other – words or phrases diminishes their potential to provide us with insight.

Although we have many words to describe what we want, what we really seek is to re-experience that time when we felt connected to the world. We can ask ourselves: "What is the feeling we want beneath what we think we want?" and "What is it we would really like behind our pursuit of possessions, relationships, or personal gain?" When we answer these questions honestly they will then lead us to the feeling we seek, which includes the experience of compassion and respect. When we allow ourselves to have this feeling we begin to experience a deeper sense of purpose in life.

No matter how powerful are our concepts of this feeling, they never are the same as the feeling itself. This also holds true for our concepts about the world. Words can hover at the surface of reality or they can serve as tools to help us move toward deeper insights. Words can point to other words or they can show us a possibility beyond themselves – to guide us to a genuine understanding of our world and ourselves. They also can move us toward an awareness that all of our concepts from the past – right up to this moment – must give way if we are to succeed in our quest to experience the truth of each new moment as it unfolds.

We want peace – both in our world and within ourselves – but our concept of peace can only shed light upon what we really seek, which is the experience of peace. To have this experience we must learn to cultivate it within ourselves – to identify what peace is as a lived reality that can pervade our consciousness and color our view of the world and our actions. The same holds for happiness, of which the concept and experience are as different from each other as is our reflection from our essence. And so it goes for love, satisfaction, and the entire range of hopes and aspirations that gain meaning as they become felt. Our experience of our feelings – rather than their concepts – leads us to a deeper validation of who we are.

In a very real way we already have what we most want. Our concepts are our windows on the world, but reality is beyond our concepts. Our perceptions bring us an image of reality, but reality itself remains unknown. What we can see of an onion – or of a person – is only a veneer that hides innumerable layers. We require a model of reality to guide us, but realizing that our view of the world is not the same thing as the world itself brings us to a new level of understanding.

When expressed in words, reality seems complex. But when experienced it is simple. We try to view our world through the facets of our inner kaleidoscope, but the world that we see in those rare moments when we are able to discard the veil between ourselves and reality is infinitely deeper and broader than any of our ideas. Knowing this leaves us with a profound respect for the world, for others, and for ourselves.

We might not know – now or ever – the deepest secrets of the universe. We rely on our concepts not because of how much we know but because of how little we know. No matter how brilliant we believe ourselves to be we only really know what we experience and feel. We can never really know the world. Yet awareness of our limitations leaves us with a new appreciation for life. When simply observing what is around us we find that there are infinite layers and great beauty in every human being and understand that all are deserving of respect. And by doing this we can any moment we can choose to experience our own worth.

We are good not because we have done something we consider good, and we are not bad because we have made bad choices. There is within us a potential far beyond the limitations of our judgments. There are hidden abilities in each of us that long have been trapped by our decision to play the limited role to which we have assigned ourselves. As children we knew less about who we were and thus were able to learn more quickly. But

as adults we become more convinced of our limitations. Genuine respect for the infinite possibilities within us opens us to an expansion of our self-understanding that can take us beyond our self-imposed limits. We become more as we discover more about who we are. Real self-respect is a deep feeling of appreciation for ourselves – accompanied by humility – that extends through us into the world.

When we truly grant ourselves respect we honor each of our feelings and thoughts as they move through us in a continual stream. This means that all are valid – as we are valid – and then we choose those upon which to act. Each time a part of us is revealed – whether we like that part of us or not – we can acknowledge it and again renew our respect for who we are. We have done nothing to make us deserve to be tossed onto the waste heap of humanity. No matter what we may have done or fear doing, we can once again embark upon the path of renewal when we acknowledge and forgive who – and how – we are. When we think of ourselves as failures we act as failures. But when we allow ourselves to feel valued this becomes reflected in our actions. We bring an experience of fullness to ourselves and those around us. We no longer need to rely on the world to validate who we are. Real happiness is giving ourselves permission to be however we find ourselves to be, which takes us far beyond the limited individual we have created ourselves to be. We are multi-faceted entities that far supersede our idea of who we are – yet in a very real way this is what we have known all along.

During those times when we experience real happiness we acknowledge the connection between ourselves and the world that we abandoned as we matured and took on our roles. The reality of who we are – as best it can be described – is that of a separate being while at the same time an entity connected to the world, yet our thoughts allow us to consider only one aspect who we are at a time. Knowing this lets us acknowledge the possibility that we may be more than our idea of ourselves. It allows us to move back to the viewpoint of how the world appeared to us before we created ourselves as separate beings. We always have intuitively known our true nature, and trusting this brings us back to a more realistic understanding of who we are.

We spend most of our lives trying to attain a feeling of happiness that already exists within us. It does not need to wait for permission from people and situations to be felt. We breathe more easily and steadily as the connection between all parts of us – and between us and the world – becomes more clear. Our attempts at fulfillment try to establish this connection that already exists. When aware that we are not a picture frozen in time we are more understanding and compassionate toward ourselves. We appreciate that we are continually changing rather than a series of snapshots in search of unity. The self that we use to navigate the world may be based on a concept of who we are, but when we simply allow ourselves to be who we find ourselves to be we discover a new sense of ourselves.

As we become secure in our ability to bring peace to ourselves we no longer rely on it coming from the outside. This is done by simply allowing ourselves to be as we are, with the continual stream of experience that flows through us. We then bring peace with us into our interactions with the world. We no longer hope for happiness, but the happiness

we find within us becomes our guide for how to act. We no longer are victims of circumstance but are able to bring a sense of security to the circumstances we encounter. It becomes clear that despite our appearance of separateness from the world we are essentially one with it. Our interconnectedness becomes clear as we shift back to the perspective with which we were born. This brings us a joy that pervades all of our experience, even our pain. We feel it in our muscles and bones and breath it into our lungs. We become willing participants in the drama of life rather its victims. Our world seems to slow down. That part of our brain that watches and governs our actions becomes a nurturant force – rather than a censor – that allows all parts of us to work together harmoniously. We surprise ourselves by what we can accomplish. And we learn to trust ourselves at a level that supercedes our thoughts.

We know that we will again be disappointed and that life will not meet our expectations. At times we and our lives will again fall short of our hopes. People will take advantage of us and try to harm us and we will fail at things we try. But in each moment – including this one – we choose whether to allow ourselves the feeling of unity within us and with the world that is already there. To experience peace we must choose it in this moment. Peace is less about change than about being present with the world – and ourselves – as we find them. We can hope to do this in the future, or we can choose peace in the present, which really is the only time we can do anything.

No matter what we have done – or how much frustration or hate we have felt – we can, in any moment, return to a feeling of self-forgiveness. We may find that we need to do this several times each day or hour. But in those moments we no longer depend on others to validate us as human beings. We no longer need to act out against others because we have given ourselves what we really want.

The place where we really dwell is not one of concepts but one of feeling and of the experience of life. By viewing ourselves as valid human beings we get to reclaim our original sense of joyful participation in life. We understand that our visions also are valid and worth pursuing. The eventual fulfillment of our everyday visions is not what constitutes success. It is our re-commitment to our ultimate vision of peace and inner fulfillment, and bringing these qualities to our interactions with the world in each passing moment.

Each of us eventually encounters serious obstacles to meeting our goals. Poor physical health, discouraging work situations, disappointment in relationships, or what seems to simply be bad luck sooner or later impacts us all. But we then choose whether to respond to these challenges with resentment or with resilience. Dwelling on the difficulties worsens our plight. Knowing that our value as human beings is not affected by our circumstances encourages us to spring back. When we renew our commitment to this world-view we give notice that we are not defeated and others also will see us that way. We experience appreciation for what we have been given. Real success is knowing that we all are beings of infinite possibility.

But then again someone mistreats us, or the world refuses to cooperate with our expectations, and we begin to experience disconnection and defeat. But we can allow ourselves validity even with our discouragement. As we do this we return to our sense of harmony with the world. We can open ourselves to all of our thoughts and emotions – including those we once feared – as they flow through us. Our higher self embraces us and reassures us of our value as a person as we leave our critical self behind.

It appears that the force that put us here – whether it be nature or a divine being – did not intend for us to experience happiness in every moment. Yet despite the limited beings that we find ourselves to be, we can find within us visions to guide us and the motivation to work toward making our visions a reality. We can curse the shortcomings of our existence or be grateful for the limited time that we are granted on this earth. And if we so choose, we can remind ourselves in each moment who we really are – an entity beyond our limited view of ourselves, and why we really are here – which is to live in peace with ourselves and with our world. As we do this we become reconfirmed in our understanding of our highest purpose and know that its achievement rests perpetually in our hands.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE OTHER

Each of our relationships is, in a very real way, a relationship with ourselves. Although we usually see ourselves as separate from those around us, we seek an experience of connection with others throughout our lives. We see in others qualities that we want for ourselves, and find that we are attracted to those who seem to possess these qualities because of the feeling of approval that we believe our interactions will bring.

When I see strength in others it allows me to experience my own strength. Being in the presence of what I consider beauty allows me to touch the beauty within me. Interacting with those who I see as honest reminds me of own capacity for honesty. Seeing the spontaneity of children brings to mind the carefree quality I want in my own life, and encountering those who seem to possess understanding gives me faith that life has meaning. Our relationships have the potential to confirm the loving and critical parts of us, as well as the masculine, the feminine, the confident, the vulnerable, the sensitive, the innocent, and the poetic.

We get our ideals for how to look and act from the people we admire, including our parents, teachers, and friends. We believe that we are valued when we live up to the standards they have set and not valued when we don't, but often we find these standards impossible to meet. Some of our models teach us the importance of resolving our issues with others in a respectful manner. Others promote confrontation or violence as a way to deal with our problems. We struggle to gain the acceptance of those we admire, but no matter how hard we try we rarely are able to attain the consistent approval we crave.

We put people on pedestals who we believe embody our ideals – athletes, actors, musicians, politicians, writers, and others we admire, even parents or friends. They represent the qualities we want in our own lives. But we also delight when their weaknesses are revealed. Seeing the human side of our idols makes them seem more like us, while hopefully making us more like them.

Our self-esteem often is based on how we believe we compare with others. If I think that you possess the strength that I lack I may consider you to be a better person than me. If I think that you are weaker than me I may consider you beneath me. We always want to know if we are smarter, faster, richer, or better-looking than the next person. We try to improve our self-image by competing with others, but even when we win we aren't satisfied for long. We await the next competition to reaffirm our self-esteem.

Others see us – and we see them – through the filter of previous encounters. The images that we hold in our minds are all that we know of people, and at times our concepts about others seem to place insurmountable barriers between us. Often we interact based not on what we see, but on what we believe about the other person. We each do our best to create a self-image that will win approval, but we actually have no control over what others think of us, and others cannot control what we think of them. We bring our expectations into our interactions which then reaffirm our beliefs about whether others

are worthwhile human beings. We avoid revealing our emotions and shortcomings so as not to be judged, and then hold others responsible for our feeling of rejection. We distance ourselves from people and then blame them for our feeling of isolation.

The standards that we use to evaluate people are set deeply in our minds and often we judge others from the moment we meet them. Our ridicule and wrath are directed toward those who seem to possess the qualities we dislike, while this eases our fear of having these qualities exposed in ourselves. When we find anger in others we don't have to acknowledge our own anger. We feel better about ourselves when others seem less intelligent than us. Seeing what we consider ugliness reminds us of our own fear of being ugly and at the same time places ugliness outside of us, at least for now.

Our expectations for our relationships are based on our history with others. We carry a concept of our past relationships in our minds, and then use it to frame every new situation. If I believe that I have had supportive interactions for most of my life I will expect others to like me. If I have a history of abuse or abandonment, I will expect more of the same. My experience with you may have both positive and negative elements, but my mind only allows me to maintain one impression at a time. If I decide that I like you or that you like me, the thought of you will bring me a sense of well-being. But deciding that I dislike you – or that you dislike me – will bring me negative feelings. I create my positive and negative impressions based on how I view you, and then hold you responsible for these feelings.

Often I will believe that what I do to you doesn't affect me. But what I experience in my thoughts and feelings is all that I know of you. Where you exist for me is in my mind and emotions. Thus judgment or hatred of you brings me discomfort. If I react to you with tension, then that place where I experience you within me is tense. If I react positively to my thought of you, then that part of me that experiences you is joyful. But when I base my happiness on whether you meet my expectations I set myself up for disappointment.

Because we carry our concept of the world within us, we each have the ability to experience and express every conceivable emotion. Our interactions inspire us to tap the enormous range of feelings within us - to contact parts of ourselves that would otherwise remain subdued. A male will seek the company of someone - usually a female - to allow him to experience the softer side of his personality, while other males may help to validate his assertiveness. Females also pursue interactions that allow them to experience their assertiveness, but seek to contact their sensitive side in other encounters. We want our relationships to allow us to balance our strength with sensitivity, our assertiveness with appreciation, and our destructiveness with creativity. But no one can force us to reveal those parts of us that we choose to keep hidden.

When we limit ourselves to the ideas of ourselves and others that we hold in our minds, we sacrifice our ability to discover and experience the vastness within every human being. Yet we are much more than an idea. When we simply watch ourselves it becomes clear that we are an infinite and unique combination of elements that cannot easily be described – an entity that is continually changing. When we compare ourselves – and

others – with the ideals that we hold in our minds we invariably fall short. But we can at any time remember that the reality of who we are is beyond any concept. We can allow ourselves to observe and respect our unfolding personality – and that of each individual we encounter – as it is revealed to us. We begin to see that there is a worthwhile being at the core of every person and begin to move closer to interacting with the reality of others rather than our ideas about them. And as we do this we open ourselves to the possibility of more positive, productive and enjoyable relationships.

Every day we separate our friends from our enemies, good people from bad, and those we find attractive from the ugly. We determine those with whom we want to interact – those with whom we want to be connected and disconnected. We consider those close to us as a source of happiness and hold those who we keep at a distance a source of discomfort. In each moment that we spend with – or think about – another person we choose between an experience of connection or separation, compassion or judgment, support or condemnation, trust or distrust, respect or disrespect. When we choose isolation we experience discomfort. But when we emphasize our connection to others we transcend our barriers. As we bring compassion to others we experience our common humanity despite the shortcomings common to our nature. And as we forgive others we experience forgiveness for ourselves.

We often believe that we must wait for approval from others before we can approve ourselves. But regardless of what anyone else does, I have the ability to bring myself the experience of approval I seek. By doing this I acknowledge my own value as a person. This is the true source of the experience of peace I seek. I deny myself happiness when I judge others, but when I recognize the value of another person I experience the connection that I seek. As I do this I no longer hold others responsible for my happiness.

Only we can bring forgiveness to ourselves. When we do this we no longer need to be different than we are to be worthwhile human beings. Our forgiveness extends to our past, present and future. And then we allow it to extend to our interactions with others. We may not always trust other people – often with good reason – but when we are grounded in genuine self-respect we see others with open eyes. We are more realistic in what we expect of them. We are no longer emotionally needy; we appreciate what others offer without expecting them to act as we think they should, or to meet our needs.

Like a diamond, each of us is multi-faceted. We have unlimited potential, much of which remains untapped. Our basic nature is the same in many ways, but how that nature is expressed is always unique. We all have the same desire for recognition. We want satisfaction in life and fulfillment in our relationships. We experience sadness and then joy, sometimes one after another. We are confident and then lack confidence. But when we hold others responsible for our happiness we set ourselves up for failure. When we appreciate who we are – with our virtues, our faults, and the infinite aspects of our personalities that defy description – we no longer crave approval from others. We begin interacting from the core of our being rather than from an attempt to impress others, and we allow ourselves to experience and express who we find ourselves to be rather than focusing on how we think we should be.

I experience peace when willing to be who and how I am despite the fluctuations of my mind. I see that my moods vary – as well as my perceptions and actions based on them – but my value as a person never wavers despite where my mind takes me. As I identify the place of peace within me I bring it to my interactions with others, who will then choose whether to allow it to themselves. Changing other people – or ourselves – will not bring us peace because peace is coming to grips with the reality of who we are. From the viewpoint of anxiety there is always something that must be changed. But in the moment that we extend recognition to another we also bring peace to ourselves.

Our actions can affect the success or failure of others. When we emphasize what we see as the negative in others we contribute to a negative self-image that can lead to hurtful actions toward oneself and others. But when we support others by recognizing and encouraging their potential they are more likely to see the possibilities within them. And as we do this we reignite the potential within ourselves. We usually see children as growing beings with infinite potential whose mistakes are to be forgiven, but we view adults as finished products who deserve to be judged for their thoughts and actions. But we each have the ability to learn and grow indefinitely, and the support of those around us can help in that process. Throughout their lives all human beings have the potential to continually clarify and move toward their most significant goals, and this can be affected by the support – or lack of support – of those around them.

In each moment – including this one – I choose by my thoughts and actions toward others whether to move our world toward being a place of kind and competent beings, or toward a place where people have little confidence in themselves or their future. When I see – and express faith – in the value of others it increases the chance that they will contribute toward the creation of a better world. If I emphasize the competent side of others they are more likely to see themselves as competent. If I see the kindness in others they are more likely to see themselves as kind. But regardless of my impact, the moment I bring kindness to another I experience it myself.

We each want recognition and love, but as concepts these qualities lack the power to transform us. They only have impact when we are willing to allow ourselves to experience the feeling behind them. When we ask ourselves: "What does recognition feel like?" or "What is the experience of love?" we find that these questions can lead us closer to the feeling we seek. This allows us to move beyond a need for continual recognition. When we no longer depend on others to confirm our value we begin to appreciate those around us as we find them to be, however that may be. As we do this for others we also open to the myriad of possibilities within us.

We often feel that we are ignored or treated rudely by others. People misunderstand us or our intentions. Even our families and friends at times seem to mistreat us. At these times we can take a moment to allow ourselves to go back to the feeling of self-respect. As we regain our respect it extends once again into our interactions.

Those around us usually do what they see as best for themselves. They see us through the filter of their own experience. They rarely do what we want just to bring us happiness. Yet we can at any time remind ourselves to maintain the feeling of respect for ourselves that no one can give us or take away. There may be blame or guilt around us but we can move back toward an appreciation of our common humanity, knowing that we and all other human beings are more alike than different. This is real compassion, which can never be used to benefit one person at the expense of another. Those who claim to be more righteous than others are the most isolated of human beings – and often are tainted by scandal.

We usually see others as made totally of one cloth. It seems safer to hold a simple image of a person rather than to admit how little we know. We find it difficult to maintain a balanced picture in our minds as our thoughts rarely allow us to see the positive and negative sides of a person at the same time. We consider people handsome and disregard their physical flaws. We see strength and ignore weakness. We fail to notice the positive in those we have cast in a negative light. We make assumptions about people based on their appearance, backgrounds, or our past experience with them. People tend to be good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak, handsome or ugly in our minds. I feel good when I meet or think about people I consider good, and have bad feelings toward those I consider bad. But every person has both a positive and negative side, which we ignore when we dwell on only one aspect of one's personality.

We often make assumptions about how others will perceive us. Thinking that others are supportive helps us to believe that we can act with confidence in pursuit of our goals. Assuming that others do not support us often convinces us that whatever we try will go down in defeat. But when we are grounded in a realistic self-understanding that includes our strengths, our weaknesses, and the realization that there is still much about us we have yet to learn, we can proceed toward our goals with a sense of self that is based more in reality rather than in assumption.

Our judgments of others say more about the workings of our minds than reality. We set unreasonable expectations for those around us and then create discomfort for ourselves as we criticize others for their shortcomings. Negative attitudes toward others bring us an experience of negativity. Our judgments may not hurt others but our negative thoughts and emotions invariably are hurtful to ourselves. When we hate others we hurt ourselves the most.

We may experience anger, hatred, fear or envy but we are never forced to act upon these emotions. We can remember that they are common to the human experience, keeping in mind that we all fluctuate between feelings both positive and negative and that no one is to blame for them. When we find ourselves caught in thoughts and actions that move us away from our essential experience of ourselves we can stop and reconsider our course. We can remind ourselves about what we really want, and re-align ourselves with our true priority, which is a feeling of genuine respect for the limited being we are. This then becomes a part of our interactions.

Regardless of what people do, we can at any time return to that place of respect that we most want. The first step is realizing that we are creating a barrier between ourselves and others in our minds. The next step is acknowledging our connection to others in our thoughts and feelings, and the third step is acting from the viewpoint of that connection. When we do this we gain control over our own experience of others and our world.

When we deeply feel respect toward others it emanates from us and at the same time illuminates us. And when once again we find ourselves caught in judgment we can remind ourselves that all of who we are – both the good and the bad – is worthy of forgiveness. We then gain strength from the feeling of connection that this understanding brings.

When we see qualities that we consider negative in others – hatred, aggression, anger, prejudice, cowardice, insensitivity, cruelty – we can look inside and also find these in ourselves. Judging and trying to purge others and ourselves of our weaknesses only strengthens them. But when we bring forgiveness to our weaknesses they get the attention they want and no longer dominate our lives. The feelings that we try to block stay with us, but the feelings that we forgive – and allow to flow through us – no longer control our thoughts or actions.

Those we blame for our discomfort become evil in our minds. But if I so choose, I can at this moment set aside my distrust and move toward an appreciation of any human being based on what we have in common. I can bring empathy toward what I see as your view of the world, which I also experience within me. This enhances our ability to identify and work together toward common goals. The best communication takes place between people who are willing to share their feelings and ideas – even if different – in a spirit of respect. What is most important is not who is right but how best to work together toward recognizing and meeting our most essential human needs.

We contribute to discomfort in others when we express our dissatisfaction verbally, and of course harm them when we express our anger physically. It is more productive to bring the sense of connection that we want into our interactions than dwelling on what we see as missing. Our perceptions of the positive and negative have their roots in the fluctuations of our minds and have little to do with those we blame. Relationships can become abusive as we hold others responsible for our feelings. My negative thoughts and emotions toward others bring me suffering and are their own consequence. My judgments and hatred bring me an experience of unhappiness as I cling to them. Expressing my rage may bring momentary relief but ultimately it will deepen my discomfort.

The way we see others may or may not reflect their views, but it definitely reflects our own. Allowing ourselves a sense of connection to others allows us to be sensitive to their moods and feelings just as we want them to be sensitive to ours. When we make others enemies in our minds we lose an opportunity to work with them toward creating a better world. Even if we defeat one enemy we soon find another because our nature is to seek someone to blame for our discomfort.

Our minds crave certainty, and we want to make it easier for us to know who to trust and who not to trust. From this viewpoint evil is always "out there." We rarely consider the possibility that we may share some of the traits of those we consider evil. Just like those we criticize, we also are at times hateful, vain, judgmental, and angry. Yet we would rather avoid – and sometimes kill – others than establish dialogue, and they often regard us the same way. When another expresses hatred toward us or those around us, it is how we respond that shapes how we feel, not what that person has done. But when secure in our happiness evil has no grip.

We often believe that our survival depends on punishing those we blame for our unhappiness, but we cannot punish or humiliate another person without affecting ourselves. We may believe that someone causes us pain by hurting us or someone we love, and we hope for revenge. But our inner wounds fester as long as we blame others. There is never closure in revenge – it only perpetuates our isolation and pain. Closure begins with a forgiveness that acknowledges our pain – no matter how deep – and then allows us to begin to move on. Thus in each moment of our lives we choose whether to live in a forgiving world.

When I remind myself about – and choose to allow – the commonality of the human experience that flows through me and others, including the joy and the pain, I bring myself the understanding that I seek. I no longer see my situation and suffering as unique. I understand that the most essential element within me is the ability to feel. I become aware that the cost of clinging to a rigid concept of myself or others is to lose touch with the essence of who I am. Forgiveness allows me to be a participant our common humanity which allows us to work toward solving our common challenges.

Although we spend our lives seeking it, the unity – or interconnectedness – between us and others is already established. We are connected both physically and emotionally by the elements that flow through us. In each moment we decide whether to allow ourselves to experience this connection. True compassion is not just a word. It is a willingness to honor every part of ourselves and others – even with our shortcomings. Because we are connected to all human beings we also are a recipient of the results of our acts. A kind deed toward another is a kind deed toward ourselves and an unkind deed toward another is felt within. The compassion we receive or fail to receive is in our hands because respect for others – and for ourselves – is experienced exactly the same way. In that moment that we truly value other human beings we also value ourselves.

We have within us every element of humanity – the beauty and the treachery, the love and the will to harm. Every emotion that we feel toward another is experienced within us. When we hate or judge others we experience hate and judgment in our own minds and bodies. When we are destructive we feel that destructiveness. When we harbor anger toward another it affects us more than the target of our fury. But as we treat others kindly we bring a feeling of kindness to ourselves.

Our communication with others is difficult at times because we each have a different view of the world. The words I use may be familiar to you but you may have an entirely

different picture in your mind of what they convey. What is most crucial is that we interact in a respectful manner until we clarify a common course of action. Disrespect in our interactions distracts us from what is really important, which is working together toward determining the actions that best serve our common purpose.

Within each of us there is a judge who criticizes us for going off path, but we also have an inner teacher who seeks to redirect our steps. This teacher never loses sight of our potential for good. When we recognize that what is most important is what we have in common with others we can comment on their behavior without criticizing who they are. In a very real way we speak to ourselves as we speak to others. Our comments are most effective when they come from a place of support – and not criticism. Only when we forgive human shortcomings can we begin to correct them and work with others to identify and move together toward common goals.

We will never solve all difficulties between us but the path toward the solution of our problems is not complex. When we communicate from an understanding that we have much in common and with the realization that no one is better than another – that no human being has a higher moral ground – we take the first step toward respectful relationships. The perspective that others – or their viewpoints – are inferior contributes toward resentment, and sometimes toward violence. What we most want is respect and we get that when we bring it into our interactions. But to work this must be approached at the feeling level, not just as a concept.

Of course we must defend ourselves when physically attacked, keeping in mind that the actions of those who attack us are based on an assumption that we mean to threaten them. Violence is based on a belief that productive communication is not possible. But violence never solves problems – it only contributes to more violence. Sooner or later disputes must be resolved. Collaboration with others toward a common solution – based on a common vision – brings us a sense of fulfillment.

At one time in our lives we were totally dependent on people to meet our needs, and still are, in a very real way. We all do what we must to survive. But being dependent on the approval of others creates a need that no one can fulfill. If I continually believe that my happiness depends on what people think or do then happiness will forever elude me. Ultimately it is not the words or actions of others that affect us most deeply – it is our decision to believe that others can affect our value as human beings. In every moment – including this one – we decide whether or not to allow ourselves respect for how we find ourselves to be, which also brings us the experience of happiness we seek. This moves us beyond being victims of others or the circumstances of our lives.

In our workplaces, our homes, and places of recreation, we can establish ground rules for conduct based on our mutual purpose. It is reasonable to expect that everyone follow these rules, but respectful reminders – rather than threats of punishment – are most effective in getting people back on track. When we emphasize our common goals and mutual respect – rather than who is right or wrong – we build bridges that are likely to lead to greater understanding. Our ultimate purpose is to touch what is best within us and

to bring that quality into play in the world. We experience compassion when we approach people without blame or guilt. This connection to others provides us guidance without forcing us to follow a rigid, predetermined course. Compassion cannot determine how we will act in every moment, but will make it more likely that we will act in harmony.

We must ask ourselves if we want our children to live in a world governed more by harmony than hatred, and if so, what we can do to make that world a reality. We continually decide whether to acknowledge our connection to others and treat them with respect. In each moment we determine if we are going to model how to act productively with others. We can be an example for how to resolve conflicts if we decide to do so. Commitment to this principle is what yields results. We – and our world – will never make progress toward creating a better world if we perpetually wait for others to treat us well.

When secure in my value as a person – which includes my strengths and weakness – I allow myself to have the thoughts and emotions that come to me in the course of everyday living. I no longer depend on others to establish my value, or think that I need to be different than I am to be worthwhile. I do not fear that anything that I think, feel or do can lessen my worth. Those who disagree or criticize me are no longer a threat to my well-being, but are contributors of feedback that I can use to better understand myself. I do not need permission to like myself. I embrace who I am – with my assets and shortcomings – as an expression of the esteem that I hold for myself. I welcome all aspects of humanity – both the positive and negative – that I discover within me, and of others as reflected in me. And then I bring this respect for the totality of my being to my interactions with those I encounter in each passing moment – every day of my life.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE WORLD

In each moment of our lives we move our world closer to – or farther from – our vision of how we would like it to be. We do this in the realm of our thoughts and feelings as well as by our actions. Our ultimate goal for our planet – and ourselves – is peace, but peace is not only a lack of conflict between individuals or nations. Real peace includes the contentment that we hope to experience when all hostilities in our lives and world would cease.

We begin life with a sense of connection to that which surrounds us, and gradually move toward a viewpoint of separateness from the world. At an early age we decide that events outside of us cause our happiness or unhappiness. We find that the world is not always a kind place - people often treat others poorly; natural disasters threaten us; war and poverty may affect us. Events seem determined to defeat our efforts to bring peace to ourselves and world. But in our minds we continue to compare our vision of a world free of strife with the reality that we see around us. Occasionally the world meets our expectations, but most often it fails to fulfill our hopes for the place we would like it to be.

Our world seems filled with threats to our happiness and security. We never know when an illness, accident, or hostile act will interrupt our lives. We are never sure when a war will start, a terrorist will attack, or a natural disaster will strike. Even our relationships with our families and friends sometimes seem in turmoil. Our daily routines occupy our attention most of the time, and our minds always wander back to a fear of what might happen. Yet deep within us we continue to hope for that moment when our world will be safe and we can experience the peace we seek.

There are times when we find a glimpse of peace in the smile of a child, a sunset, or a breakthrough in relations between nations that seemed poised for war. There are times when the compassion of others seems to shed a light on us. But after each brief moment of peace our minds again return to the turmoil that seems brought on by the events of our lives and world.

When we look at our past it becomes clear that the human race has never long been free of strife. We have left a trail of turbulence and war – with occasional periods of peace – far back into history and no doubt beyond. When we honestly watch ourselves we see that our minds also vacillate between unrest and peace regardless of the events around us. At times we see the world as friendly – and at other times unfriendly – and then events seem to confirm our view. When we believe that the world supports us we find that we are able to work with others to clarify and move toward common goals. But when we feel threatened we see a world filled with danger; we find our paths blocked and we want to battle those who seem to be a threat.

Our expectations are a filter through which we perceive and judge all that comes before us. When we believe that others – or the circumstances of our lives – treat us unfairly, our resentments keep us from the experience of peace we want. We hold the world

responsible for our inner wounds, unaware that we create and deepen them as we blame others. While stuck in blame we miss opportunities to consider or take new paths toward the solution of our problems. First in our minds – and then by our actions – we divide the world into us and them: those who look or think like us versus those who do not; those who meet our expectations versus those who fail to meet them; those who are with us versus those who are against us.

We become convinced that others either support us or work against us. We open our minds and hearts to those we believe to be on our side and distance ourselves from those who seem to oppose us, although often we switch the same people – or nations – from one category to the other. But all we really know of our universe is that place within us where we experience it, so when we judge or condemn others – or our world – we also bring suffering to ourselves.

When we experience unhappiness we see the world as its source; when we suffer we see the cause of our pain as coming from outside of us. Rarely does it occur to us that our view of the world may be the source of our feelings, or that taking a viewpoint of connection to others and our world may move us past our experience of isolation.

The blinders through which we view the world limit our vision. Often we assume it to be a hostile place. We are quick to blame and slow to forgive. If another person disagrees with us we may believe that we are being personally attacked. If someone seems to ignore us, we may assume that we have been rejected. Often others seem to see us not as living and breathing beings worthy of respect but as objects in their path. We assume - but don't really know – what goes on in the minds of others. They see the world through the filter of previous experience, as do we. Like us, others often become caught in their preconceptions rather than simply observing what is in front of them. But when we assume the world to be against us we mainly harm ourselves. Even our health is affected as we create tension in our bodies and our breathing becomes shallow. Our minds exaggerate the threat around us and we respond by creating a more dangerous world.

Within each of us there is a judge who condemns every person and thing that fails to meet its standards and often we are the ones who gets condemned. We assume we have a right to judge, not seeing that we cause ourselves pain as we do. But often it is not the circumstances of our lives and world that create our discomfort but our judgments themselves. We hold ideals in our minds for how we and others should look and act and how our world should appear. As we compare what we see with our expectations we dwell on the shortcomings of those around us, ourselves, and our world, and we experience alienation. We keep ourselves from meaningful and productive interactions with others and our world. We block ourselves from identifying and moving together toward common solutions to the problems of our planet.

We seek recognition, but rarely receive the understanding that we think we deserve. Our revenge for not being loved or understood is often played out on a global scale. We focus on getting those who we consider to be our enemies – those who fail to see our value as a person – out of our lives or off of our planet. Yet being rid of those who we consider our

enemies fails to give us peace of mind. We soon find someone else to blame for our discomfort. Every act of violence that we envision – or act upon – moves us and our world farther from where we want to be. Identifying our enemies clarifies our roles; we are right and they are wrong. But our real worst enemy is the hatred and resentment that isolates us from others and causes our discontentment.

Battling our enemies gives an outlet to our fears but winning never leads to a long-term solution to our disagreements. We may hold the vanquished under foot, but their resentments will build until they can no longer be oppressed. Those we consider to be our enemies have the same hopes as we do, which ultimately is to see their world as a place of peace. Like us, they strive to bring meaning to their lives by convincing others of the nobility of their intent and actions.

According to the teachings of many traditions – as well as the science of our day – we can trace our ancestry back to a few individuals upon whom the human race was founded. Thus there is a bond between all human beings – whether we like it or not – and the expressions of individuals are variations on the themes of love and hate, peace and conflict. We construct our identities, in part, as members of our race and society. Our cultures provide a model for how a person should look and act, and each culture expresses the strength and beauty of its traditions through its beliefs and customs. Some promote values where all are respected, while some demonize those who vary from their norms. Each of us represents a unique expression of how one might act within – and sometimes in rebellion against – the norms of our cultures.

Once – near the time of our origin as a race – we were a family. Then we expanded into tribes and nations. But we still carry within us the same common characteristics – the fears that try to alert us to danger, the longing to put our fears to rest, and a desire to experience a connection with others and our world. We blame the world for our fears, which we fail to see as a part of our human makeup. But what we hate in others also can be found in ourselves – including arrogance and incompetence. When we are able to see our judgments and isolation as a source of our anxiety we can begin to renew our sense of connection to others and the world. Then the experience of connection brings compassion, and when we extend compassion toward others we experience it ourselves. Thus treating people as we would like to be treated is its own reward. This points beyond our endless cycle of blame and retribution to the experience of peace we seek.

Nothing can be accomplished without a shared vision. Our lives are guided by hopes for ourselves and our civilization. Yet our anger at those we blame for blocking our vision – and causing us pain – keeps us from identifying and pursuing mutual goals. When we emphasize who is right and who is wrong – or who is good and bad – we assume that we are the ones who are right. As we focus on what we view as the shortcomings of those around us and our world we become obsessed with doing away with those faults – and often those who possess them. We do this rather than recognizing the potential for good in each individual, which is essential for moving toward our ultimate vision for our world.

In any moment – including this one – we may experience joy or sadness, relaxation or anxiety, compassion or hate, or perhaps a feeling that is not easily described. The reality of our condition cannot be described by words – which refer to the past – but only by observation. We cannot change what we feel in this moment or at any point in time. But we can choose to honor who we find ourselves to be. When we judge the feelings and thoughts that we find within us we are continually at war with ourselves. But when we fully acknowledge ourselves as we are – with our strengths and weakness, joy and pain – we are rewarded with compassion and recognition. We find ourselves experiencing the peace and happiness that we have been seeking. We no longer wait for the world or circumstances of our lives to provide our fulfillment. Now our question becomes: "How do we bring this compassion into our interactions with the world?"

The clearer our vision for what is possible for ourselves – and our world – the greater its chance to succeed. We all have a desire for peace within us that includes a picture of how peace would look in the world. But our vision can only begin to approach fulfillment when we commit ourselves to actions that reflect it. When we hold in our minds an image of peaceful and productive interaction with the world we begin to communicate that possibility in the way we speak and act. We increase the likelihood of others joining us in that effort. Our vision guides us to bring respect into our interactions with all that surrounds us. But to be effective we must hold this vision at the level of a feeling, not just as a concept. Once established, this feeling flows through us and extends beyond us into the world. When I hold others in mind as enemies – and they do the same to me – no progress is possible. But when I look behind the facade of others and discover the reality that we are very much the same – and that our ultimate goal is peace – I diminish my contribution to making the world a dangerous place.

To make progress toward a world of peace – and of greater respect between individuals and nations – we can focus on questions that lead to a common vision of what we want and how to proceed. We can ask: "What kind of world do we want to live in?" and, "What does that look and feel like?" and then, "What can we do to get there?" This will help to clarify our vision and the steps we need to take toward its fulfillment. This allows us to tap an inner wisdom born of self-trust. When openly asked and honestly answered in a spirit of dialogue, these questions and others like them move us in the direction of a world of greater peace and prosperity, which always come hand in hand. But if we start with an assumption that our world-view is right and that of others is wrong, then the essential process of dialogue is doomed.

Whether our origin was in a garden or savanna, most of us have adjusted well to an increasingly complex world. Our civilization reflects thousands of years of purposeful thought and action by those who have preceded us. We have been largely successful in our efforts to survive based on an ability to adapt to a changing environment, largely of our making. We have been impressive in our ability to work together to overcome the threats and demands of our surroundings, which we have greatly altered in the process. Yet biology's graveyards are filled with species and civilizations that failed to adapt to challenges that were perhaps imperceptible in their time. Our greatest challenge is to see ourselves not only as products of our past but as partners who can work together to meet

the requirements of an ever-changing present. Our future will be determined by the success – or lack of success – of our efforts to adapt as a race to a world that is only predictable in that we can be sure that it will continue to challenge us and demand our best in order to continue our civilization.

We have largely succeeded at providing for our physical needs – at least in our industrialized nations – although our success has brought a whole new level of challenge. When we emphasize only what we consider our own needs – rather than what works best to meet the needs of the world around us – we fail to notice the effects of what we do, which inevitably comes back to affect us. We have learned to worship at the alter of the individual – to ignore our connection to the world and the perspective that comes from this understanding. The gradual destruction of our planet – and thus of ourselves – is barely noticed. The perspective that we choose – whether toward the individual or toward our interconnectedness, whether toward a short-term or long-term perspective – will make the difference for our failure or success as a civilization.

Nothing has brought the world more problems than certainty. We are certain about who we are: our abilities and limitations. We are certain about those around us: who is good and bad, who is on our side and who is not. We are certain about other nations: whether they are compatible with us or if we must stand our guard. We are certain that what seems to have worked in the past will continue to work in the future. Yet when we put aside our certainty – and open our minds to what our world would teach us – we find that reality often is different from our beliefs. We find that those who we think of as solid have a vulnerable side, those we consider ugly have a beautiful side, those we believe to be our enemy have a loving side. We discover that every part of our world has nuances we had never noticed. We also find that some of the everyday routines that we had considered harmless – such as how we feed or transport ourselves – have considerable repercussions for our environment and thus ourselves.

Moving beyond our concepts of the world to a simple observation of reality can open a world to us far different than what we think we know. We find that we only can expect the unexpected. When we open our eyes, minds, and hearts we find every aspect of our world – including ourselves – to be forever changing. Openness to what is in front of us leads to unexpected insights, as well as to humility about how little we really know and how much more there is to the world than we ever can imagine. And from a standing of humility we are more likely to see what we have in common with others rather than our differences. We are less likely to feel attacked or a need to attack. Ironically, when we see the world more clearly we are more ready to respond to attacks that are real.

Our technologies may advance, but our minds and habits are – in many ways – still in the dark ages. We can do things that people have never done and travel to places where they have never have been, but on the inside we still harbor judgments and hatred toward others that are based on misunderstandings, and this causes us harm. We can send messages around the world in an instant, yet we still see the world around us as dangerous and then contribute to making it a place of danger. We may promote a model

of optimism for the human race, but often still are governed by a part of us that is mired in pessimism about the world around us.

When we feel a connection to our surroundings – and thus ourselves – our world seems to be a supportive place. But we divide it into segments by our thoughts and then spend our lives trying to put it back together. We strive to establish connections within a world where all parts are already connected. We perpetually want the world to be different than it is – to fit our picture of how it should be. But things often don't go according to our plans or wishes and we are left with anger, hatred and resentment. We feel helpless – and often bitter – toward forces that seem to be beyond our control. Events often seem aligned to defeat us. The world seems at best insensitive to our needs, and at worst intentionally harmful.

But at any time we can allow ourselves to return to the perspective of connection with others and our world – and thus with ourselves. We can gain control of our experience which leads to greater control over our circumstances as we become calmer and more focused. We can begin to see that our welfare and that of our world are entwined. Awareness of this connection evokes our compassion rather than the critic within us. We still will be overwhelmed by pessimism and fear at times, but when we bring appreciation to the person who we find ourselves to be – even with our shortcomings – we return to a sense of peace. We gain a renewed and genuine self-respect. We experience a new level of compassion for ourselves – even with our pain. We gain empathy toward the world as it is experienced and reflected in us. We feel more in tune with our world and self, despite their imperfections.

As we bring the feeling of compassion to bear on our lives we find that our true priority – the experience of peace – pervades our minds. We still find that we are at times judgmental – or even hateful. But allowing those aspects of our personality to be there – rather than fighting them – encourages them to flow through and beyond us. As we allow ourselves to experience compassion we find that we less often judge others and our world when they fall short of our expectations. We understand that judging – or changing – ourselves and the world has never brought us peace, but that real peace is coming to grips with how we find ourselves and world to be in each passing moment.

All elements of life flow through us and back out into the universe. When we see ourselves as connected to all that exists we understand that everything we do to and in the world also affects us – each of our actions leads to an endless chain of events. When I hurt others I make my world a more hurtful place; but a small act to bring peace to the world brings me peace. The viewpoint of interconnectedness is as valid as that of separateness, but keeping in mind our connections with the world – although at times they may be hard to see – leads to a much more positive result. What we have in common is greater than our differences, and when we emphasize common needs we make greater progress toward our goals.

From this viewpoint we begin to see the consequences of our thoughts and actions upon our world and ourselves. We often believe that events lead to our unhappiness. But we

also can view events as a series of happenings – one leading to another – that are random in their intent with no one to blame. When we see that our discomfort is not caused by the malevolence of others or of nature we move beyond a belief that the world is against us, or that we deserve bad things to happen. We begin to re-connect with ourselves and restore the compassion that we deserve. Our inner judge drops away and we begin to take care of ourselves in small but significant ways because we understand that we deserve happiness as much as anyone. We move past punishment and begin to allow ourselves the nurturance and understanding that we deserve.

Others can offer – but only we can decide – to allow ourselves the feeling of contentment we most want. Then we can begin to honor and take better care of ourselves based on that peace of mind. We can bring compassion and appreciation to ourselves – and to the beauty and creativity within us that lie yet unexplored. Our inner peace becomes expressed in what we do – how we walk, talk and hold ourselves.

The consequences of simply allowing ourselves to be – regardless of our perceived shortcomings – can be profound. We find that the possibilities within us are infinitely greater than our limitations. We begin to show love toward ourselves as the loving part within us slowly gains confidence. We no longer need to wait for permission for our beauty and creativity to be released. We begin to bring forth that for which it seems we were born in our own unique way. We are no longer obsessed with those parts of us that we find less than perfect as a larger sense of who we are emerges. It becomes clear that only we – and no one else – can bring us the sense of validity that we deserve.

The viewpoint of interconnectedness also provides a new perspective to our interactions. Our judgments never will quite go away but as we see the harm that they cause us we become less likely to allow them to affect our actions. We find a greater sense of peace in our thoughts about others and the world. We find ourselves more willing to forgive and have less of a need to retaliate when we believe ourselves wronged. We see people less from our expectations and more from how we simply observe them to be. We have greater tolerance for their actions. We are more aware of our common humanity and we experience a greater connection with those who are close to us as well as those we pass on the street. We no longer allow people or circumstances to determine our value as a person. We still know that some people can pose a threat but we no longer live our lives continually threatened as we remind ourselves that the priority for ourselves and others is an experience of peace.

We know that people often overreact, or don't pay much attention, to the world outside the realm of their thoughts – as do we – and we are less offended by their inattentive acts than when we assumed that they were due to insensitivity. We forgive them for those human failings that we all share, and move on in our quest to work with others toward making the world a place that better meets all of our needs. When we open to the view of our connection to the world our perspective incorporates the wholeness of which all human beings, creatures, and things are but a part. We see that our thoughts and actions have an effect on our world and on ourselves at the same time. The viewpoint of

interconnectedness guides our interactions in a way that is more in tune with our real priorities than the viewpoint of separateness that we once assumed.

It becomes clear that each of our actions contributes toward making the world a better or worse place. We witness the impulses that move through us but are no longer controlled by them. We open ourselves to seeing each person and situation as unique. The guidelines that we have set for our lives and civilization continually change but our viewpoint is now founded on an insight into the interdependence of all things. We understand that our societies only realize their purposes when they move the best interests of all individuals and our planet forward together and that advancing the interests of any at the expense of others creates imbalances that long to be undone.

We see the importance of creating a world that is run on a principle of respect for every living being so that we also can be treated fairly. We become advocates of justice for others as we know that this leads to a more just world for ourselves and those close to us. We see the importance of compassion – not just as a word but as a guiding principle – and understand that it does not stop at the parameters of our bodies or at the borders of our nations. It involves bringing profound respect not only to those who think and look like us, but to every aspect of our planet including individuals who may look different from us or hold entirely different views of the world.

The principle of interconnectedness shows us that everything we do to and for others and our world we also do to and for ourselves. We see that the world we envision is possible when we commit our efforts toward moving beyond barriers between people toward our common purpose of peace. We want to be appreciated and respected so we interact with others with respect and an appreciation of their dignity. We want to live up to our maximum potential so we provide educational and recreational opportunities which encourage others – including those of limited resources – to build a sense of self-esteem and competence: to gain skills which allow them to contribute to society and lift themselves in the process. We want prosperity so we commit ourselves to a world that moves in the direction of economic opportunity for everyone.

These actions are as much selfish as altruistic. They are the means by which we create a world that supports all of us in moving toward our ultimate goal of peace. We see that everyone can become a contributor to society when in possession of the competence and confidence to do so. We know that when people see their lives as isolated and hopeless they are prone to violent thoughts and actions that affect everyone and everything around them. Thus we move toward a world where respect governs our actions toward each other and our planet.

Perhaps most importantly, our sense of connectedness creates an ongoing interaction between us and the world. It overcomes our isolation from those parts of our world – and ourselves – that we most fear. We establish a new level of respect for ourselves and others. We learn the true meaning of compassion: to respect people and our earth not only for their usefulness but out of regard for their intrinsic value. This also brings us an

experience of being valued. We gain a new appreciation for our earth and each of its inhabitants.

The belief that one person or nation is more righteous than another is what keeps us perpetually at war or under the threat of war. We see the world as dangerous when we assume that others are not willing to hear us. Thus it is up to each of us to begin a dialogue to move toward the peace that we all want, rather than waiting for someone else to begin. This is the most essential lesson for each of us and our most significant responsibility. Dialogue removes our cloak of superiority and makes us vulnerable to the viewpoints of others that, at first, may seem to make little sense or even alienate us. Yet it is only by honoring other viewpoints – and those who hold them – that we begin to create a world where our own views can be honored. Winning a war will not do this; if we were to remove everyone from the planet we dislike or who disagrees with us, others would soon appear who we find equally repulsive. We will always be limited by the parameters of our vision – we see only that which is revealed to us, much as the sun reflects only on one part of the world at a time. Yet there is always a larger reality beyond what we can see. Honoring our world and opening to the views of others provides us a balanced perspective from which we can move forward more firmly planted in reality.

We each begin life with a sense of wonder for what is around us, but learn to distrust this part of ourselves early in life. Our openness to the world once brought us a great depth of emotion but we learned to bury this as we became convinced that it was not a part of our true nature. We come to believe that we are the concepts and roles that others have taught us about ourselves. We think we are male, female, strong, weak, handsome, ugly, smart, dumb, capable, incompetent and many other labels that provide us stable beliefs about ourselves but deny us a deeper understanding of our nature. By the time we have established our concepts of ourselves we have sacrificed much of our spontaneity and with it our respect for a large part of who we are. We have taken much of the joy out of living. We retain a vague sense that we have lost something significant as we continue to limit ourselves and those around us to a concept. We have largely abandoned the sense of spontaneity with which we were born. Yet much of what we have lost can be regained as we open ourselves to what we find within us: we discover that we are much more profound and beautiful than we had believed ourselves to be, and that much of our potential is yet untapped.

If we are to establish the world of respect between individuals and toward our surroundings that we envision, our compassion cannot stop at the borders of our communities or nations. Those who are isolated from society are a threat to our world. People act in desperation when they see no hope for their lives, families and communities. This happens within all nations. But within everyone is a desire to contribute toward a common purpose and a more peaceful world. Thus we must work to raise up all who are in need in order to move both individuals and nations toward greater self-sufficiency and self-respect. There is no possibility of independence without recognizing our interdependence. We all rely on the resources around us – natural and human – to survive. The resources we devote to fighting each other divide us and distract

us from creating the world we want – a place where every individual is valued and respected so that we can be valued and respected.

The ravages of an unexpected or natural disaster can affect any of us at any time. When this happens our compassion is most severely tested. Yet we must be prepared as a race – and as a family – to do for others what we would hope they would do for us. Our greatest fear is not living through a disaster but that a disaster will leave us undone. Thus we must develop and maintain resources that are available at all times to support those who survive devastation. With foresight and an adequate plan in place we can prepare for disasters, and support those who are affected to restore their lives. And when disaster strikes – as it will for every community, sooner or later – we will have sown the seeds of our own recovery.

Our greatest resource of all – next to a determination to work together as a unified race – is the infinitely complex natural world into which we are fortunate enough to have been born. Not a moment goes by when we don't partake of the bounty of our environment – the air, water, food and other resources on which we depend. We and our industries continually expel waste into our world, and our waste contributes to a toxicity that will perpetuate itself for generations. Much of it recirculates back into our bodies before it can be rendered harmless by nature. We use our resources faster than they can be replenished. We are about to choke on the results of our own prosperity while we alter the very nature of the earth we have been given. Thus we must agree – both as individuals and as nations – to lifestyles of sustainability. We must acknowledge the limits to how much waste we can produce without poisoning ourselves. We must continue to develop technology that will bring us energy without forcing up the temperature and destroying earth as we know it.

Each of us must be willing to make sacrifices to keep our world livable, rather than simply pointing to sacrifices that should be made by others. The security of knowing that we are able to sustain our world is easily worth the effort it will take to get there. But to do this we must create standards that apply equally to everyone. We must devote extraordinary energy toward educating all in the importance of adjusting our lifestyles to match the limits of our resources. The result will be a world in which everyone gets to take part in sustaining our planet so that the activities that we consider essential to being human can continue.

We each possess an unlimited potential for fulfillment. A gain for one benefits all, as our lives are intertwined. We must recognize and encourage the best in others if we are to proceed together toward our mutual goal of a peaceful world. We have a right to expect participation and cooperation from others, but instead of waiting, each of us can become a model for what is possible for all human beings. This is based on a determination to create a working relationship with others to pursue the highest priorities of our race and planet. In this way our vision of peace becomes reflected in our actions.

Fulfillment includes not only material survival but honoring that place within us that soars at the recognition of beauty in the world and in ourselves. If the world meets every

one of our visions and we still lack joy then we have wasted our efforts. True progress involves not only changing our planet but opening our spirit to the enjoyment of our interactions with others and our world. If we bring a feeling of appreciation to ourselves we cannot but extend it to the world around us. Our rules provide guidelines for our actions – but our ultimate guide is born of a sense of fulfillment that we carry with us.

Our daily lives will remind us that the path to our most significant goals is not a straight one. At times we will fall, we will fail, and we will lose sight of our direction. Things will happen that are beyond our control. But an undying commitment to our vision will sustain us as we steer our ship through a sea that – in part – must always remain uncharted.

We are each born a being of infinite possibility. But at those points in our lives when we see our image as cast in stone we become defined more by our limits than by our potential. At any time we can view the other side of that coin that portrays our limits – the side that shows us a possibility for how we and our world can be. As we renew our focus on our deepest vision we reignite our sense of excitement and discovery toward a world that we assumed to have long been lost, and this becomes our guide.

Some day we will look back and ask ourselves if we fulfilled our purpose in being on this earth. What did we do to make our world a better place? Did we honor the best in ourselves and others? Did we appreciate those moments in each day that have the potential to make life special? Did we leave our planet in usable condition for those who follow? Our legacy will be not whether we have created perfection – that is beyond us – but whether we have reached for the best within us and have done all we can to bring it forth so as to touch everyone and everything around us. Knowing that we have done this will bring us an abiding sense of peace as we pass the responsibility for the fate of our planet on to the next generation. Now may be the time to start. In fact, now is the only time we can start.

RAISING RESPONSIBLE CHILDREN

We hope to provide our children with the advantages that we would have wanted for ourselves and we seek to experience satisfaction by witnessing their success. But early in their lives we discover that our children are different from us. They have their own personalities as well as their own interests and tastes. Trying to force our views on them leads to a struggle, but when left totally free children flounder. Thus we must provide them with the best guidance we can while realizing that they ultimately will make their own choices for the direction of their lives.

Our top priority must be to value our children for who they are. Showing them respect – regardless of their actions – will maximize the likelihood that they will respect themselves and others. We will have done our job if we can inspire them to bring compassion to themselves and those around them and be able to move forward regardless of the setbacks that life brings. We must listen to them and be willing to compromise if we are to raise children who are able to work with others to identify and achieve common goals.

From the very beginning children practice the skills they need to communicate what they want. Crying, whining, and hitting hopefully yield to respectful interaction with others. As they begin to take their place in society children learn that to get what they want from others they must offer something in return. What they, and we, most want – beyond our most basic needs – is respect and understanding. They absorb more from our actions than our words, and are most likely to learn respectful communication if we model it. They learn from us habits of continually complaining about what life brings, or of identifying and staying focused on their goals. We may try to guide them to foresee the possible consequences of their actions, but it takes years for them to understand that their actions contribute toward making their lives – and thus their world – a better or worse place.

We can encourage small steps toward competence that teach children to take responsibility in real-life situations, such as household tasks or meal planning. In areas where they may be weak – such as hygiene or room cleaning – we can provide rewards to get their attention until these tasks become habits. Practicing these skills trains the brain as well as the body to be aware of the impact of one's actions.

We also must not overlook the value of play. In addition to enjoyment for its own sake, play teaches children to participate with others spontaneously and creatively on mutual projects. This is an important part of learning to be confident in their ability to interact with others and in being comfortable with themselves.

At times our children will disappoint us – and themselves – by not putting out their best. Often they don't see the correlation between persistence and accomplishment in areas such as athletics, academics and interpersonal skills. They easily can become discouraged and caught in a cycle of self-blame which further deters their efforts. They seem surprised when they don't get maximum results for minimum effort. This is when we must give them credit for every small attempt at accomplishment. This helps to create a

pattern of self-confidence that extends to the next effort. But as much as we may value our children, it ultimately will be their decision whether to value themselves.

Children often are threatened by the dark places in their minds. For them – as for us – their fears are real. We cannot erase their fears but we can listen and encourage them to express them. Even when they refuse to do this, knowing that the adults in their lives are aligned with them against their fears is an important step in overcoming them. Providing compassion – rather than judgment – allows them to express their insecurities and then move past them, connecting once again to the world. Compassion reestablishes a bond between them and others and permits a return to the expression of the natural joy within.

Irresponsible actions of children often are born of fear or frustration. These acts may lead to their own consequences that tend to be the best teachers, such as isolation from others. If nature does not provide a consequence we may need to do so – such as loss of privilege. But when we react with violence to our children's actions we teach them violence. Blame and guilt are never productive because they instill fear and make them less aware of what they do. We reinforce a self-image of competence when we reward even small accomplishments, either verbally or by other means. We reinforce a self-image of incompetence when we dwell on what the child is doing wrong. We can encourage responsible behavior by recognizing each effort – no matter how small – in its direction.

It is important to make our children aware that the world does hold the potential for danger and train them to be prepared for this. But the world contains both good and evil. Children can understand that there are those who might hurt them but that there is no need to live in fear. By learning preparedness for possible dangers they gain a sense of control over what might cause them harm. The minds of children are flexible enough to allow them to be aware that there is danger in the world, but to still enjoy their lives and interactions with others.

We want to impart a viewpoint of responsibility – of seeing the importance of the long-term versus the short-term, of considering the perspective of others and not just our own. Again, we can provide guidance for this but the best teacher is experience. As needed we can gently point out the consequences of not thinking ahead and how, in some circumstances, it might lead to disaster. Some exposure to the suffering in the world can teach more than words, but we can introduce our children to the possibility that suffering often is the result of human actions. The most effective form of teaching is to model responsibility by acting respectfully toward others.

The most important value that we can teach our children – largely by example – is that we value our family and everyone in it, as well as every other person in our world. This is most likely to lead to an appreciation for the infinite potential in all of us – as well as in themselves. Hopefully this will provide them with the confidence they need to succeed in their own lives, and to inspire confidence in generations yet to come.

RESPONSIBILITY AND EDUCATION

Life begins as an adventure of discovery. We leap into our lessons in an effort to learn as much as we can about our world and ourselves. We fail at our first attempts to master even the most basic skills – such as walking and talking – but continue to try until we succeed. Throughout our lives, confidence is the key to seeing each experience as a lesson rather than a defeat. If we believe that we are supported and valued by those around us we feel secure in our ability to forge ahead and to make new discoveries. Feeling unsupported creates doubts about our value as human beings and our ability to learn. Those who have the most influence in our lives – including our best teachers – support us both as individuals and as learners.

The purpose of education – in addition to the enjoyment of learning – is preparation for our role in the world. Education at its best enables us to identify and pursue our visions despite the challenges that life presents. When we see the relevance of what we learn to our lives we willingly focus on skills that improve our likelihood to succeed. But lessons that do not seem useful – or even interesting – place a wall before us rather than a window to the world.

Our educational system often confuses real learning with the memorization of facts – or what we are told are facts. But lessons that are not seen to have a connection to our lives are guaranteed to leave a large number of children behind, who then become liabilities to us all. Our prisons and homeless shelters are filled with people who have failed to develop the skills they need for success. Most would leap at a chance to learn skills that would enable them to rebuild their lives. It benefits everyone when we all have an education that maximizes our potential to contribute to society.

Skills-based learning emphasizes subjects that are separated from the context of everyday life. Children must take it on faith that math, reading, writing, history and other areas into which we have divided the world will someday be of use. But there are no such divisions in the real world. Projects-based learning shows us the value of skills that make sense in the world that we see and know. The need for math may not be obvious at first but it becomes much more important when we see how it is essential to using money to buy the things we want. Lists of words to be memorized may not hold much appeal, but words that make up the story of our heroes are more likely to entice us to read. Trips into the community to see jobs that adults actually do can inspire us to come back to the classroom to focus on some of those skills – such as writing – that are needed for real work. History can be taught around areas of interest – such as sports – and then expanded into larger realms by creative teaching. Lessons about these and other areas that students see as important to their lives – such as how to raise children or resolve conflicts – are most likely to hold their attention and lead to skills that apply in the real world.

Encouraging children to make decisions – and seeing which of these succeed or fail – can lead to the judgment and confidence to pursue realistic goals. The world is always changing, and the illusion that there are pre-set answers to life's challenges leaves students ill-prepared for what they will encounter. What's important is not coming up

with the "right" answer, but learning to develop one's own answers that can be used in the course of living. Nurturant guidance – combined with exposure to real-life situations – can teach the confidence and skills needed to take on each new challenge as it arises.

Ethical behavior – which essentially is acting out of respect for others – also is best taught in the context of real life. Right and wrong – what works and what doesn't in our interactions with others – can be explored as it relates to the lives of students by discussion in the classroom. This provides insight into how one might live, rather than teaching a rigid system that does not apply to an ever-changing world.

Children can readily learn that they create the kind of world they live in by how they treat others and their environment, and that we get respect by giving it. We can teach them – but they must eventually determine for themselves – that the priority in any disagreement is to forge solutions to differences. Nothing is more important than learning to resolve conflicts by verbal, rather than violent, means. To create the world we want, we must learn and practice alternatives to violence. Real winners are never those who dominate others but those who work with people to identify and achieve mutual goals through dialogue. These are the most important principles that enable our society to function.

Children may listen to our words, but they copy our actions. They learn an ethical approach to life from those who consider the long-term effects of their actions. We best teach respect for others – and our planet – when we demonstrate respect toward them and others. What we do today will affect our planet tomorrow. We must continually ask ourselves if we are setting an example for how we want our students to act. Learning to identify actions that work toward achieving our goals for the world will result in a more responsible generation of young adults.

Completing a battery of tests does little to prepare us for the realities of life. Those who would educate us may serve as guides but the real world must be our ultimate teacher. Students should be considered to have finished their education when they can show that they have gained the skills they need to function responsibly in the world, not just to pass tests. Evaluations of competence can be done by a committee of educators whose purpose is to prepare students to take their place in society. If educators do their jobs the first time their students may not need to go back to repeat their lessons, but there is no stigma to devoting extra time to preparing for one's role in the world. This will always be less expensive – and less costly in human lives – than leaving our children behind.

Learning is a lifelong process. When we stop learning we stop living. Our most important lesson – and one that we must relearn continuously – is that the thoughts, feelings and dreams of each of us are equally valid. This leads to an understanding that our problems can be resolved in a spirit of respect and cooperation. We are born with a feeling of wonder about the universe and an ability to appreciate each other and every moment of life. It is the appropriate role of education to enhance – rather than discourage – these qualities within each of us as we expand our understanding of our world and of ourselves.

RESPONSIBILITY AND GOVERNMENT

Over the course of our history the way we govern ourselves has evolved from family to tribe to government. The primary purpose of joining forces with others is to accomplish what we cannot as individuals – to establish rules and laws that benefit us all; to create programs and infrastructures that serve the common good. We have learned to subdue our hostilities – most of the time – so that we can live with others. The most stable governments are those that promote the greatest benefit for the largest number of people, but power sometimes becomes concentrated in the hands of a few who serve their own limited interests. They often are overthrown by the efforts – or lack of support – of those who find themselves oppressed.

We all want to live in a world where we and our rights are respected. Thus we must support governments that respect the rights of all to live as freely as possible. But we can never be totally free. We need to forgo short-term gains to provide long-term benefits to ourselves and our society. We must pool our resources to have roads and schools, to provide common protections, and to beautify our cities and towns. We must maintain vigilance against those who would use their liberty to infringe on our own. We must support the most vulnerable among us so that all may be supported in times of need. To gain popular support some leaders tell us that freedom is getting everything we want, but our best leaders remind us of the necessary sacrifices – and advantages – of working together to create strong communities and nations. Real strength is not the power that we use against others, but is the unity of purpose that results when we join in a common cause that reflects the needs of all.

Our governments are composed of individuals who often are competent, yet at times limited in their vision. Thus those who govern must be subject to accountability from those they would govern at all times. When we give our leaders free reign we invite a betrayal of our trust. When they provide unfair advantage to some, the rights of all are threatened. Real patriotism is not blind obeisance to what our leaders tell us, but commitment to the principle of universal respect that makes civilization work. It is not necessarily doing what we have always done, but instead it is following our common ideals. Only with this in mind can we move toward our shared vision of peace. Sooner or later we realize that war is a dead end – that sworn enemies eventually come to the peace table, even after generations of war. Those who maintain a clear vision of a path to peace are those who eventually prevail. It is they who deserve our trust.

Often we choose our leaders because of confidence or charisma. Rather, we should focus on whether they uphold our most essential principles – not only in word but in deed – and if they have a clear plan for how to move us closer to a world of greater equality and fairness, which is the only world in which peace can exist. Each of us are different, but we all have the potential to make a contribution to society. It is the legitimate role of government to move us toward a world where this potential is recognized. Our governments must act to promote human rights and thus the rights of us all. They must promote education, job training, and economic opportunities that lead toward a greater balance in our society. They should provide incentives so that businesses and jobs that

contribute to the greater good are encouraged, and present a clear plan to prevent waste and degradation of our planet. These efforts serve to reconfirm our interconnectedness and encourage the cooperation of all toward the common good.

Politics is the art of convincing others of the validity of our views and uniting people to act toward implementing them. Politicians often are actors who are most interested in convincing us that they are the best candidates to fill the roles they seek. Our most effective leaders look beyond politics to communicate a vision for what is possible that touches the best in each of us. They inspire us to see new possibilities for our nations and ourselves.

There are elements in every political system that are considered conservative or liberal, and both are vital to our civilization. True conservatism is more than focusing on a particular point in the past – it is a commitment to our most enduring values. Genuine liberalism is not promoting change for its own sake, but is a determination to bring the value of universal dignity into the fabric of our society. Socialism, capitalism, communism, and anarchism all are ideals that have minimal application to the complexities of real governments. We gain insight by observing and interacting with our world to determine what really works best to serve us all. Effective leaders are able to see past the limited viewpoints of those who think like them and draw on the efforts of the best and brightest regardless of political affiliation. They focus their gaze past the ground before them to guide us over the next horizon and beyond.

Everyone is deserving of respect, including those born to privilege, those doing the everyday work of society, and those who have yet to realize their potential. To ensure that the interests of all are represented in the functioning of our governments we should promote discussion of all significant social topics within our communities. Such community coalitions would focus on the major issues that affect us and their recommendations then would be passed on to larger representative groups. They would be guided by the principle of respect for every individual but would help us arrive at rational and broad-based approaches to our issues. This would ensure that all are able to explore and express their views on topics of both local and national concern. Such a meeting of the minds would provide a more comprehensive perspective than that of any one individual.

It is the responsibility of those within our governments to provide leadership on the key issues of our age and of every age. Their effectiveness is determined by the clarity of their visions, which must reflect the needs and most essential priorities of the people they serve. Leaders who pursue war – rather than diplomacy – when their citizens desire peace should be removed, and those who allow our planet to become less livable should face the consequences of their misguided priorities. Competent leaders take into account the needs of every segment of the population. Our governments must lead the way, but always in partnership with the people they serve. To this end they remain an extension of our families and communities and reflect the greater common good.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE ECONOMY

The realm of economics is subject to the same principle of interconnectedness as every other area of our lives and world. Our economies are in many ways like people. They function best when there is good circulation that allows a healthy flow to all parts. To succeed all segments must work in harmony and people at all income levels must participate. Poor circulation to any area ultimately has an unhealthy effect on the whole. And just as individuals depend on a network of support with others, our economies benefit from a circulation of goods and services between nations where those on both sides benefit equally.

Well-functioning economies are built on trust. Money – and its accumulation – has no value in itself because people only can really use goods and services. We get what we wear, what we eat, the place we live, and what we drive in exchange for what we produce. Money is of value only when it can be exchanged for something of real worth.

Nothing that we consider of value stays the same. I may believe that I own things – my house, my car, my furniture, my clothing – but they all change over time. Money that I put in the hands of banks or investment firms is re-invested and kept in circulation. When we purchase large items we usually use money that we borrow from banks, which comes from the deposits of others. An interruption in this economic flow can affect our lives at any time, creating a slowing of the circulation of funds and of goods and services. Distrust between individuals or nations causes disruption of trade. Stability only exists when we trust our economic system – which means trusting others – and this allows for a healthy economic flow.

Before the advent of money, good faith negotiations between individuals provided a basis for exchange. People bartered products or services that were valued by others. An agreed item of value eventually made trade easier – such as a tooth or tobacco – and the foundation of money was established. Trust still remains the basis of trade, but we have largely lost the pride that comes from producing a product or service. We rarely see how what we create affects the lives of others.

It is our nature to continually want more than we have. But there is a limit to how much any one person can use. We believe that our next acquisition will provide satisfaction, but it satisfies us only until the sensation of need returns. When we believe that we are incomplete we never can have enough to make us feel whole. But when we see ourselves as deserving to participate in the flow of prosperity we draw prosperity to us.

Our governments have a major responsibility in providing stable economies. Markets left on their own do not spur economic growth because accumulation by some impedes the flow of goods and services for all. The water in dammed rivers must be gradually released to sustain the entire river system. Over-accumulation causes our economy to stagnate. Economic practices that enrich some and impoverish others ultimately harm us all by the inequity they create. This is why we need laws to not only protect victims, but to guard our society from the economic downturns and imbalances caused by such

practices. We cannot outlaw greed, but we can outlaw predatory attitudes that threaten to unbalance our economy and thus the lives of us all.

Those who remain at the poverty level present a burden not only to themselves but to society as a whole. Their need for goods and services become a drain on the resources of their nation, while their chronic discontent presents a threat to political and economic stability. It is our responsibility to ensure that education and training are provided for all in skills that will benefit both them and society. This is much less expensive than the perpetuation of poverty. As people move above the poverty level they spend money which fuels the economy and benefits everyone. They become contributing members of society and attain the self-pride that makes them less likely to engage in criminal acts.

Economic stability results when nearly everyone participates. When those at lower income levels can afford what they need it creates a greater demand for products and services, which in turn creates more jobs that stabilize businesses and the economy and add to the tax base. Most consumers recognize and demand quality, so companies are more stable that provide quality products that last. Consumers cannot be expected to buy inferior products just because they are produced in their own country. Those who produce quality will benefit from increased demand and be able to attract the best employees. Those who pursue only profits thus are less likely to profit. We need to make the sacrifices in short term comfort that allow us to invest in strengthening our economies, but this will provide returns for all in the long run. We must pool our funds to meet our common needs in the present in areas such as healthcare and education – because neglecting our responsibilities now leaves a burden of debt for the future that can undo our economies for generations to come.

Greater consumption brings greater environmental threats. Our current manufacturing and transportation methods threaten to erode our way of life through pollutants that accumulate in our environment and – ultimately – in ourselves. Our ingenuity must be focused on innovations such as sustainable energy that will not run out, alternative packaging, and non-toxic agriculture so that our civilization can move forward. Although our industries often resist change, they benefit from the opportunities that result from innovation. It is the legitimate role of government to encourage investments in areas such as clean technologies that benefit us all.

Economies that function well become magnets for individuals from countries with less vibrant economic systems. Thus it is imperative that successful economies mentor poorer ones by providing assistance to spur their growth. All leaders should support this effort because economic stability in other countries leads to more stable governments for everyone.

When – as a society – we invest in people we get tangible results. We do this by putting the long-term needs of all ahead of the short-term desires of some. Generosity begets prosperity, but selfishness begets poverty. The investments that yield the best results are those that we make in each other that ultimately benefit ourselves.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

At some point in our collective past we discovered the use of punishment and have rarely looked back. We believe that punishment and the threat of punishment provides us ways to control people and to make them educable. We punish our children to make them learn the lessons that we believe they need for life. We punish those who violate our moral and civil codes in the hope that they will change their ways. The punishment we inflict may include physical means, fines, or imprisonment, but mainly it imposes a threat of being cut off from society and of not being considered worthwhile as human beings. But when we punish others – or imagine punishing them – we harm ourselves. We create resentments within us. Our bodies become tense, our breathing becomes shallow, and we isolate ourselves from the compassionate side of our nature which is our real self.

We have divided our society into those who are good and those who are bad – those who are worthwhile and those who are not – and believe that we make the world a better place by removing the undesirables from our company. Yet there is no one among us who has not made serious mistakes and been on the verge of making still larger ones. At times we all have anger that seems ready to boil over into acts of violence that we manage – only with effort – to control. We attempt to bury our discomfort – sometimes with substances, such as drugs or alcohol – so that we can mute our feelings and continue to go about our lives.

We believe that some individuals are incarnations of evil who deserve to be punished. We put increasing numbers of people in prisons, which are largely populated by those who violate what fashion deems inappropriate – such as recreational drug use. But except for those who we intend to keep permanently out of society, we must prepare the rest to eventually re-enter it. To do this, we must emphasize the skills that they will need to succeed. Our initial investment may be considerable, but the benefits to us all will easily outweigh the expense. We pay a huge price in both money and wasted human lives by punishing those who have done little to harm others. Our laws should be designed to prevent acts that threaten the fabric of our society – not those that simply offend our moral codes.

We teach our children that success consists of getting ahead of others, but often we fail to provide instruction in the much more essential life skills of interpersonal communication and problem solving. We judge the actions of those who don't live up to our ideas of how people should look and act and want to punish them for the discomfort they bring us, but this builds rage within them. Those who are convinced that they are not treated fairly by society become outcasts who often express their anger in harmful ways. This does not reduce crime, but only adds to the growing population of criminals.

We consider ours a compassionate society, yet punishment is built into the fabric of our interactions. We learn how to act from what those around us model. In most cases punishment reinforces the behavior it is intended to eliminate: those we punish become more negative in their self-images and more skillful at harming others. Punishment rarely – if ever – improves people's lives. It teaches them to hurt others rather than to respect

the world and themselves. If we are to move our society in a more positive direction then we must teach and model the respect for others that we consider to be one of our most essential values.

From the viewpoint of isolation from others, we fear and criticize feelings and actions that fall outside of what we find to be comfortable. When we believe we are victimized by the actions of others we want revenge and punishment. In our schools, our work, and our social lives we ostracize those who we don't understand or like. But when we begin to view ourselves – and our welfare – as connected to others we begin to operate from compassion. Forgiving ourselves and others for our shortcomings is the first step toward moving past a society of fear and punishment. We still can do this while holding responsible those who harm others.

Real change results from supporting movement in the direction we want to go rather than by punishing negative actions. We all do things that harm others at times, but bringing compassion to our weaknesses – both in attitude and practice – allows us to redirect our minds and actions toward the type of society we want for our selves and those close to us.

Those who express anger physically – or who harm others for personal gain – must be separated from others until they can learn more positive means of expression. But just as we would want guidance to rehabilitate our lives after having made mistakes, we must provide guidance for others to rebuild theirs. It is difficult to change life-long habits. Long-term programs to help people re-shape their actions – that include practice in the real world – are needed. If those who commit crimes already knew how to live by society's standards they would be doing so. The alternative to punishment is helping people to clarify goals and by providing education and training – both interpersonal and vocational. This is a more efficient use of public funds than prison. We see the mistakes of children as learning opportunities, but when people reach adulthood they often are considered beyond rehabilitation. We can choose to have a society where we give up on no one – for not only their own sake but for the sake of us all.

No one wants to remain hateful throughout life. Our jails are filled with people who would like to redirect their energy in a positive direction but need guidance to begin. The vast majority of those imprisoned are released back into the world with little idea of how to renew their connections to others and to the world of work. Most return to their habits of the past, which leads to overcrowding of our prisons, and which wastes lives and funds that could be used to support genuine progress for individuals and our society.

We must decide if we want to live in a world run by revenge and punishment, or one guided by compassion and understanding. A culture based on punishment keeps us reliving and reacting to the worst impulses within us. A culture based on respect and support between people is possible, but to accomplish this these qualities must be infused into all aspects of our society – including our schools, families, workplaces and our informal interactions – throughout the course of our lives.

WAR AND PEACE

Fighting and war are our most traditional means of resolving conflicts. We have rarely had a time without war or the threat of war. In our families, in our tribes, and in our nations we often have looked to vanquishing others as the easiest way to resolve our differences. Our wars have ravaged not only individuals but whole populations – and their environments – because of our unwillingness to engage in dialogue to resolve the issues that divide us.

We go to war because, more than anything, we want to experience peace. We hope to make the world safe for our model of how it should be – safe from the dominance of others and from ideas that we consider anathema to our own. We attack when we feel threatened, assuming that we will be able to stop fighting when stability is reached. But we never can know when a war will end because we cannot gauge the determination of those we fight. What begins as a small conflict often becomes a lengthy and consuming war where others are just as certain that their cause is just.

Our nations are extensions of ourselves. We can see ourselves as always right and never wrong – and as incapable of hearing others or interacting with them to resolve issues. This leaves us in a state of perpetual conflict. But we also can see ourselves – and our nations – as capable of overcoming our warlike nature and engaging in the dialogue that is required to move past our conflicts. We can bring ourselves to see that most actions on the part of others – and of other nations – are not intended to harm us but simply are expressions of how they see the world, as are ours.

When we experience discomfort with our world we look around us to determine who to blame. We prepare for battle with those who we believe disrupt our peace – or those who have the potential to do so – failing to notice that battling others never resolves our disputes for long. A struggle continues between those who dominate and those who are dominated until the day when, exhausted, each is willing to engage with the other as an equal. And then a new – and more productive – phase in the relationship between former enemies begins. After having generated the destruction that is the byproduct of war, they finally create a working relationship that fosters not only communication but, in most cases, economic growth. They form productive connections and wonder they didn't always get along.

In many ways our interactions with each other have not progressed since we first walked this earth. We seek to have peace simply by overcoming those we hold responsible for endangering us. But the experience of peace comes only when we stop blaming others for our problems. We then begin to bring greater respect into our interactions. We cannot truly call ourselves civilized until we replace anger with compassion – and war with a willingness to work tirelessly to resolve our conflicts. Our most important battle is not the one we wage against the aggression of others, but against hate itself.

There is a part within each of us that will not tolerate other religions, other political systems, or visions of how the world should be that are different from our own. At times

we get so caught up in anger that we would rather destroy the world than save it. But war never has had – and never will have – any result other than the destruction of lives and livelihoods on both sides of a conflict. It is said that war helps economies, but only when it inspires us to work together with a sense of common purpose that we could have established without war. The best leaders identify a vision that creates a bond between individuals and allows them to identify and work toward common goals.

We assume that the defeat of those we consider our enemies will bring us an experience of peace. We make large investments in time, energy and funds preparing for attack, while failing to consider whether there is a genuine threat to our well-being. There are, of course, times when we are attacked and must attack in return. We always must be prepared for that possibility. But when we begin to believe – and to teach – that those we consider our enemies are less than human we create a groundwork for blind and inhumane acts. When we insist on honoring the humanity of even our foes we confirm our own value as human beings and raise hope for an end to the blame that brought us to war.

A commitment to peace is the only true recourse against the waste that war brings. From this commitment we take responsibility for the anger that drives us to want to fight others, and consider the possibility that our actions may have inspired others to attack us. We confirm the place of peace within us and treat others with respect so that we can live in a world where all are respected. We make it our priority to teach and engage in dialogue with others to resolve our disputes. We know that no matter how long it takes to reach a resolution – and it may take generations – the dialogue that leads to living in peace is vastly superior to the consequences of living in war.

War is not our main problem. It is a symptom of our misplaced priorities. The resources that we waste on war are desperately needed to reconstruct a world that is in danger due to our over-emphasis on the short-term needs of the individual and a lack of commitment to maintaining this planet that we all share. The actions of our nations often reflect this failure to emphasize long-term consequences. When we begin to see every human being as a part of our family – however vast – it becomes clear that destroying others is also the destruction of a part of ourselves.

Our world reflects the turmoil within each of us, and the only alternative is to allow our peaceful nature – which is our genuine self – to shine forth in our views and actions. When we attack others – even verbally – we are making a statement that conflict, rather than dialogue, is the best way to solve our problems. But war can never bring us the experience of peace that we envision. An endless conflict against an ever-changing enemy will forever distract us from our true priority of peace. This is overcome only when we see that the best interests of every person and nation are one.

RESPONSIBILITY AND RELIGION

The traditions and texts of every major religion urge us to show compassion and love toward ourselves and others, but we also can find within them justification to hate. Our religions have the potential to inspire in us a profound experience of peace that we can bring to our interactions, providing a sense of unity with others and our world. Yet we also can find reasons in our religions to emphasize the differences between people and to blame others for the problems of our world. Thus it is not our religions that make us commit acts that are at times magnanimous and at other times unspeakable – it is the teachings that we choose to emphasize. In each moment of our lives – including this one – we choose to bring compassion to ourselves and others, or to dwell on our judgments. We then can justify our actions by claiming that they are rooted in divine authority. Thus – in a very real way – we each create our own religion.

We worship our worldly gods based on a hope that they will bring us happiness or a sense of meaning. Among these are money, possessions, nature, food, and power. They also can be other people. But when we see that there is a limit to the satisfaction that these gods can bring us we become confused and disappointed. We know that we have experienced happiness at times, but are unsure about how to get it back. We begin to doubt our assumptions about what works to bring us satisfaction. We may come to question whether a route to long-term happiness even exists. In these moments some of us may consider the possibility that solace may be found in connecting with an entity beyond ourselves.

The most basic teachings of all major religions emphasize our responsibility to create a better world. The Hebrew Bible teaches us: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus, 19:18)." Jesus admonishes his followers: "Judge not, lest you be judged (Matthew, 7.1)." The Quran of the Muslims tells us: "We shall always find treachery in others, so pardon them and turn away: surely Allah loves those who are good to others (5.17)." The Buddhist Pali Canon describes the path leading to the cessation of suffering: "right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (the fourth noble truth)." The Bhagavad Gita, one of the great scriptures of the Hindus, explains: "What impels us to commit sin? It is the desire for sensual and material pleasure (of the ego) that becomes anger if unfulfilled. Thus knowing the true self (Atman) to be superior to the intellect, one can kill this mighty enemy (3.36-3.43)." Yet these basic principles are ignored by some teachers in every tradition to establish authority for themselves and to unite their faithful by claiming superiority over other religions. This disregards the message of compassion and humility that are a part of the original and timeless teachings of every great religion.

If there is an omnipotent God who has brought this world into being, then it must be true that all of this God's creation – including every person – is worthy of our respect. But regardless of whether there is such a God, showing respect toward everyone and all aspects of our universe brings us an experience of the respect we most desire. Although the true nature of our world – and even of ourselves – may be beyond our understanding, we still can act confidently to bring ourselves the satisfaction we seek. Treating others as

we want to be treated brings us the feeling we want in each moment that we do this. Seeking happiness is not the same as getting it – we experience it only at those times when we bring a feeling of respect to ourselves, to others, and to the world, and the only time we can do this is now. Happiness at the expense of others is but a shadow of true happiness. The most essential principles of religion and everyday life merge to guide us in living responsible lives.

When we divide the world into segments in our minds we want to believe that some parts are superior to others – that God or goodness is in one place and not another. But an appreciation of the universe as a whole brings us an understanding of its unity that our thoughts can only begin to convey. The best of our religious rituals bring us closer to an experience of this wholeness. Within every major religion we can find a representation of the good, the beautiful, and the infinite that can guide us to bring compassion to others and ourselves. The most essential message in all religions is the forgiveness that leads to an acceptance of who we are as human beings, including our shortcomings. When we make this understanding part of our actions toward others we make the world a better place.

When we suspend our judgments and pre-conceptions of ourselves and the world we experience our most basic nature, which is joy. The human quest for an experience of peace leads to many paths, but our judgments and hatred move us further from what we seek. At our core we are each a spiritual being content in itself and assured in its relationship to the world, yet in our minds we both seek and fear this reality.

Our religions – at their best – confirm our connection to others and our world. They honor the essence of our being and of our place in the universe. They show us the beauty of our true self and how to bring it into our actions. They acknowledge the part of us that knows peace because it reaffirms our connection to the world. This is the fulfillment of our true nature and a confirmation of our unity with all people and things.

If there is a God who is in all places at one time the best way to worship that God is to honor all beings – as well as our planet – by our actions. When we hate, we also hate God's creation, including ourselves. Any teaching of hate therefore does not come from this God. There is no evil that exists in others that also does not exist in ourselves, and there is no good in us that also does not exist in others. If there is a superlative Being who went to the trouble to put us here, then clearly this Being does not want us to destroy each other as parents don't want their children to destroy themselves. If there is a Devil, it is that place within us that tells us that this creation – or any part of it – is evil.

The force that put us here – call that force God if you will – gave us reason, with which we have radically changed the earth. But we also have been given the ability to recognize the limits to reason, and to balance it with a reverence for this planet and everything on it. If our lives lack fulfillment it is because we cling to expectations for our world and selves that cannot be met. Yet we continue to seek happiness in our relationship with that which we believe will fulfill us. But whether we are religious or not, being grateful for the lives we are given moves us closer to an experience of the fulfillment we seek.

RESPONSIBILITY AND LANGUAGE

From the beginning most of us communicate our pleasure and displeasure with great clarity. We express ourselves without words – by crying or laughing, facial expression, pointing, posture, sounds, and sighs of contentment or discontent – and we continue to use these means of communication throughout life. As we become aware of who we think we are and what we think we want we begin to use words, and then sentences. Our language slowly changes from expressing an immediacy of feelings to communicating what we want others to know. As we enter into a world of concepts we lose much of our experience of direct connection to our feelings and surroundings, as well as the joy that comes with this connection. Our world becomes largely our words and thoughts about reality rather than a direct experience of what is around us.

Our language is an expression of the frame through which we have come to view the world. As we begin to believe that we are separate from our surroundings we learn names for ourselves and others. One of the first names we learn is that for our mother as we separate ourselves from her and the world. We continue to learn names for people and objects and become better at using language to get our needs met. Our vocabulary grows to match our growing personal universe. As we mature, our world expands to include relatives and friends, as well as school, work, finances, politics and other areas that we see as important to our lives.

The words and views that we hear around us largely determine how we experience the world. If the people we admire express kindness toward others, our language is more likely to communicate kindness and trust. If those close to us show meanness or distrust, our language will probably express disdain and disconnection from others.

The words that we hear and speak evoke pictures in our minds that bring us back to our earliest associations with them. Thus words have different meanings for different people. The word "mother" most likely evokes a different picture in my mind than in yours. "Dog" evokes a picture based on dogs that we have known or imagined. These inner images often are accompanied by emotion. The word "dog" may bring a feeling of happiness or of terror, depending on our experience with dogs. The names of people we like or dislike also bring us pictures – with positive or negative emotions to go with them. Our understanding of more abstract concepts is even more likely to vary from that of others. Words like "justice" or "happiness" bring different images and emotions to each of us, based on what our experience – and other people – have shown us that they mean.

Our language becomes more proficient as we find that it helps us to get our needs met. Our preconceptions – as reflected in our language – often keep us from clearly seeing the person or situation in front of us. We identify people and objects by using names, but the reality of each is an infinity of layers beyond our labels. There is more to anyone and anything than we can ever know and the reality of anyone can only begin to be appreciated or understood by observation. When I use the name of a person, I have an image in mind of how that person looks and acts, but my understanding always remains

incomplete. The word "tree" brings a picture to my mind, but every tree actually is different from any other. Observation continually unveils new aspects of our world.

We see what we believe. Our thoughts – and the words that are based on them – bring us a world of concepts rather than the world itself. When we carry negative assumptions and expectations with us, our perceptions will be negative. There are perhaps situations that are in themselves negative – such as pain – but even our pain can be made worse by dwelling on it. When we encounter other human beings without imposing our preconceptions on them we find that we are very much alike – we have the same fears and hopes. Because of its potential to evoke emotion, language can be used to unite us with others in a common vision. But when we choose to dwell on what we perceive as our differences we can easily find an excuse to hate, which then causes us harm. Both our verbal and non-verbal language conveys our attitude toward those we encounter. The way we use language has the power to bring us together to simply enjoy the company of others or in pursuit of solutions to our problems, but it also can keep us divided.

Our non-verbal messages convey to others whether we judge them or value them as human beings. Our posture and tone of voice lets people know whether we blame them or hold them in esteem. The same exact words can convey a positive or negative message – including words as simple as "hello" or "good-bye." Yet people often hear something different than what we intend. They may assume that we are judging them, and then, to our surprise, act upon what they see as our harmful intent. We can only know a person's reaction to our words by watching and listening, but even this is not always reliable. If needed, we can go back and try to correct any mistaken impression by opening ourselves to a deeper understanding of the person before us than what we get from our concepts.

The use of symbols is deeply rooted in our past and in our minds. We often focus on the symbols, rather than the substance, of what we want to convey. Symbols can be words such as peace or happiness. They can be clear or vague in their intent. Even people – or what they wear – can symbolize a particular viewpoint or message to us. A flag or a gun can be a symbol. Flags, for example, can symbolize many things including unity, tolerance or intolerance. Symbols can convey what an individual or organization stands for or what it is hoped or believed that it stands for. But the reality of each individual and culture is much more than what a symbol can convey. A willingness to simply be with – and get to know – another person leads us beyond symbols to an encounter with the heart and soul of that individual.

We each long to have our needs met. We want to be known and appreciated for who we are. Our language provides us a vehicle toward that end. But if we want to live in a world where we are heard and understood, then we must be willing to move beyond dwelling on words and open ourselves to the being beneath the surface. Our language can be a tool for profoundly connecting with others, but when it serves our preconceptions – rather than as tool for deeper understanding – we block ourselves from genuine encounters with others and our world. We also miss a chance to connect with a place deep within ourselves.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ART

Art – at its best – provides us a glimpse of a world beyond our words. We live our lives based on concepts of ourselves, of others, and of our universe. But at another level we know that there is much more to reality than we can say or think. Art provides us a deeper connection to the world – and thus to ourselves – than to where our concepts alone can lead. It has the potential to allow us to more directly discover and express our most profound ideas and feelings. Some would argue that the world revealed by art is more real than that which can be expressed by any other means.

Art has the potential to stir our sensitivity to the beauty and delicacy of each new moment. It can cause us to look again at our world – to open ourselves to what we might otherwise have missed. It can show us a new possibility for the appreciation of life – for reconnecting to the universe in a way that brings us a renewed experience of wholeness. By encouraging our minds to embrace our emotions, art nurtures that place within us that seeks recognition. It has a profound potential for healing – to reopen our spirit and renew our sense of value as human beings.

Although usually expressed by individuals, art is an essential element in binding those of every culture. It can connect or divide us. It can express political views that may link us primarily to some people to the exclusion of others. Those raised in one culture or community often find beauty and meaning in art that conveys little to those of other backgrounds. Artistic expression can move us toward greater empathy for ourselves and others, but it also can be used to move us away from understanding those who we perceive as unlike us. Art – like other means of expression – has the potential to emphasize our divisions, or to show us what we have in common with other people and cultures.

The visual arts convey a viewpoint of the universe of the artist that is conceived and projected in a unique way. Meaning is created where there was none before. The randomness of reality yields to the perspective of the artist while enhancing that of the viewer. As a result our world becomes more accessible and better understood.

Great music touches us with melodies and rhythms that are both personal and universal. It can connect us to the cadences of the universe that also are a part of our nature and that provoke emotion that links us to others. It can bring us an experience of appreciation for our culture that also transcends it.

The written word – both what we call fiction and non-fiction – also has the potential to bring us to a recognition of that place within us that is beyond everyday words. It absorbs us in a story about where we came from, who we are, and where we might be going. It causes us to identify with the traumas and triumphs of the individuals portrayed, while validating us as participants in the human drama.

The performing arts – stage and screen – provide us a vivid experience of life's traumas and the emotions that come with them. Our hopes and fears are expressed by actors or

dancers who portray idealized lives – in both comedy and tragedy – that bring insight and perspective to our own situation and lead us to deeper understanding.

Art need not be limited to traditional forms of expression. We continually choose whether to live our lives creatively or as a carefully controlled replay of where we have been and what we have done before. We can open ourselves to each moment as a new experience, or view it as a burden through which we are forced to live. Seeing new possibilities in each situation allows us to deepen our appreciation of life. It can lead to creative solutions to the ongoing challenges of our lives and of the world. Every endeavor entails risk – we may or may not succeed at everything we try even after many attempts – but trusting our creativity will open new possibilities that we had not seen before.

The most important role of art is to tap the potential that lies deep within each of us. When we genuinely nurture our expressive impulse we do the same for those around us. Only when we honor human creativity do we arrive at the most profound possibilities of which we are capable. We open ourselves to new ways for how to address the ongoing problems of our lives and world.

There is no one right way to live creative lives except by allowing ourselves to trust our spirit of creativity and to move beyond our idea of our limitations in each moment. As we do this it seems that there is no problem that cannot be solved and that there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome. Our end result may differ from our original vision but it still will be true to the spirit of our intent.

The greatest progress in the history of our race has always been sparked in moments of creativity. Those who have dared to break out of the of the common mold of reality held by those of their times – and venture that there is something beyond the obvious – have exposed the world to new ideas and the world has become better for it. Many inventions – and nearly every ground-breaking idea and thought – were at first resisted by convention. Progress begins with a vision and continues as the holder of that vision struggles to convert the materials at hand to bring it to fruition.

At times we feel overwhelmed by the problems of our lives and world. We search for a new vision for how to move beyond our impasse, which can be done only by honoring the creativity that lies within. When we trust our creative impulse it will not allow us to rest until a resolution is found. We will be impelled to move forward toward solutions that reflect the best within us as we are inspired to seek new directions. Art starts with individual inspiration but it has the potential to show us much more: to honor and respond to the creative ability in each of us as we encounter challenges that we confront as individuals and as a race.

RESPONSIBILITY AND SCIENCE

Fortunately, I was present at the advent of science. The conversation – as it best can be translated – went like this: "Look, this rock can be used to smash things. I think I'll attach a handle and call it a hammer." And the response: "If rocks were meant to have handles they would have been made that way." Thus a struggle between leaving things the way they are and improving them to better meet our needs seems to have been built into our genes – and thus our civilization – from the beginning.

For thousands of years scientific knowledge has had a profound effect on how we live. It enabled us to convert from hunters and gatherers to a more stable society based on agriculture. It empowered us to replace much of the work once done by hand with machines. At each stage there were – undoubtedly – many who saw both the advantages and disadvantages of what eventually was acknowledged as progress.

Within each of us is a deep-seated will to know – to better understand the world in order to improve our lives. But at odds with this desire is our tendency to cling to what we already think we know. We want the world to progress so that we can be more comfortable, while at the same time we value our traditions. The ideas of the sun going around the earth, the use of horses for transportation, and igniting gas lamps for light all seemed perfectly adequate in their time. But each were eventually superseded as a result of the efforts of individuals who thought long and hard about how things might be. We continue the struggle between maintaining the status quo and honoring our inquisitive side. For some of us our inquisitiveness will not allow us to rest until we have found a better way.

Science can improve our lives as we discard old ways and embrace what nature teaches us. But science never can be totally free of the values of the civilization that cradles it. Those who are in a position of power have the ability to encourage or discourage scientific inquiry. A society based upon respect and tolerance will support research in the service of human needs, but one that fails to respect human dignity will support keeping things as they are. But we must monitor science to ensure that it serves society's needs rather than our becoming slaves to progress for its own sake.

The human mind is awesome in its ability to explain our universe. Some of us worship at the alter of science. But to be effective, scientific inquiry must be supported by a network of individuals who forge convergent paths in getting nature to yield its secrets. This also increases the likelihood that science will serve us. The greatest discoveries were made in eras that encouraged and valued genuine scientific inquiry – like those of Newton, of Einstein, of the quantum theorists, and most recently of those who attempt to synthesize all understanding into a unified theory.

Science – even at its best – only can reflect the capabilities and limitations of the human mind. We think of time and space as being composed of segments, yet both actually are continuums that we divide into units to aid our understanding. Reality flows before us in an endless stream, but the way we frame it by our concepts and theories affects scientific

progress. All events in our universe affect all others, and are – in a real way – one event. When we fertilize our fields we eventually consume some of that fertilizer and when we pollute the air we eventually breathe some of that pollution. When we poison our world we poison ourselves and our children. When we honor and protect our world we also honor and protect ourselves.

We may think that we know what is happening around us, but what we actually can know is limited to what our senses are capable of telling us. We create our picture of the world from a palate that is limited in colors. No matter how innovative we might become at blending these hues into seemingly limitless concepts, we can only recombine the possibilities within us in our attempt at understanding. Our ability to predict events is – and always will be – curtailed by the limits of our vision. There is always more to reality that is beyond our understanding. Even the questions that we can ask are based in what we already think we know. Thus the optimism of every scientist must be balanced with humility.

There is a fine line between science based on the advantage of the individual and science based on the advancement of civilization. While my life may become safer and more comfortable due to the efforts of science, the effects of my lifestyle may jeopardize our planet by pollution and the destruction of resources, which also threatens me and those around me. While we prolong our own lives and make conditions more comfortable for some, life may become more difficult for others. To be effective science must take into account the needs of all as well as the effect of its innovations on our planet. This means that some of us will need to sacrifice parts of our convenience to make the world livable for all. We must choose whether our science is to serve the short-term interests of some, or the long-term interests of our entire civilization.

Our minds have always sought to understand and master our surroundings. The most powerful insights also lead to a sense of euphoria that ignites our emotions as well as our thoughts. Thus we have an inbuilt reward for understanding. But for scientists – as well as the rest of us – the most significant insights are those that lead to improvements in human lives, and in the long-term ability to sustain ourselves and our planet.

We tend to think that we already know what we need to know about the world and ourselves for our everyday functioning. Our brains and nervous systems are geared to use the same information repeatedly so that we can more easily navigate our environment. But if we stay perpetually with the same views – regardless of the changes in our landscape – we ossify ourselves as individuals and as a race. Our theories of the universe only mark limited progress in our narrative of the history of our fragile planet. The world of science has yet to align itself with its own most essential premise – that there can be no finality to our inquiry into truth. But the closer we get to truth the more free we find ourselves.

TO WHERE FROM HERE?

We start out with a sense of connection to others and to our world. Then we learn to function from a viewpoint of separateness. But throughout our lives we seek to return to that perspective with which we were born. No matter how isolated we may think we are, we can at any moment find that place within us that knows how to experience and act from an understanding of our oneness with the universe. Our discomfort and alienation from the world is rooted in a fear of aloneness, but our sense of connectedness – which is our true nature – is our ultimate guide to satisfaction in life.

The experience of connection brings us compassion for others and ourselves. We move past self-judgment and see ourselves as valid human beings – even with our every thought and feeling. We appreciate who we are with both our faults and strengths. We treat ourselves well and honor our bodies and minds as well as that part of us that longs around us. We understand that at our core we all have the same strengths and weaknesses, and that acknowledging this gives us more – not less – control over our actions. We realize that, essentially, what we and others want is the same – a sense of connection to people and our world. Rather than judging others we seek to engage them in dialogue toward mutual understanding. Our awareness of our interconnectedness with all that exists expresses itself in a renewed commitment to making the world a better place. We find that this is best done not by criticism, but by continually clarifying and moving in the direction of our vision of a world at peace. We know that the suffering of humanity and the degradation of our planet are the result of the human lack of self-respect as reflected in our actions, and that this can be overcome by supporting each other in creating a world that expresses the beauty and complexity of who we really are.

We give the children in our lives the respect that they are due and encourage them to build confidence by coming to their own conclusions about life. Our education builds understanding and an ability to think clearly while adapting to an ever-changing world. Our leaders take the long-term view of what is best for all the people they serve, rather than considering only the short-term interests of those who put them in office. Our economies function effectively as they provide a healthy flow to all levels of society. We reduce crime and its expense by providing extensive training for those who show that they are capable of re-entering society. We engage in dialogue with others with whom we may seem to disagree, knowing that ultimately we all seek a world at peace. Our actions reflect the compassion that is the most essential teaching of our religions. We are aware of the limits of our language and seek a deeper understanding based on our common purpose. Our art brings us closer to an appreciation of our deeper nature, and our science supports movement toward not only progress, but toward the preservation of our planet.

In each moment of our lives we decide – by our thoughts and actions – whether to contribute to a world of condemnation or to a world of compassion. These decisions then determine the quality of our lives, and of our interactions with others and the world in which we live. And we see that the only moment in which we can act to move toward the world we want – now and forever – is the present one.

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