August 2011:

Hope in the era of Climate Change

By Siddhartha*

This is not the place to dwell at length on climate change, but a few facts would bear mentioning. There are indications that by the end of the century we might witness the emergence of tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of climate refugees as temperatures soar and water and food resources become scarce in several parts of the world. Countries like the Maldives and Bangladesh will go under water as will many other coastal areas. Lester Brown has indicated that a one degree rise in temperature could mean a ten percent reduction in food production. In India a two degree rise could signal the beginning of the end of rice and wheat crops. Some parts of the world would become unliveable.

But many are also acting to slow this trend, if not halt it. It must be noted that thousands of organisations, and millions of people, all over our planet are trying to reduce their needs: using less power, riding bicycles, using public transport, harvesting rainwater, eating less meat to save on grain, going solar and so on. Big technological breakthroughs are also in the offing. If the changes happens fast enough we might still be able to avert the worst. The big challenge is whether governments will take the hard decisions. So far the conferences at Copenhagen and Cancun have not produced any binding agreements to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. This has led some to believe, rightly or wrongly, that our planetary future is bleak.

In this rather anxious context what is the meaning of hope?

The coming years will surely witness the emergence of a body of literature on the ethical, psychological and spiritual dimensions related to the era of Climate Change. What follows are some modest reflections in this direction.

To begin with most of us find meaning and fulfilment in our day-to-day concerns and the little things of life. What would we do without the love and companionship of our parents, children, friends and others dear to us? Despite many things going wrong around us we never cease to feel the joy of looking at plants, trees turning green in spring, the wild flowers of summer, the frolicking squirrels and the chirping of birds. We enjoy our favourite dishes, the onset of the mango season, and sweetmeats like ladoos and khulfis. How exciting it is to watch a good movie, or read a well written book, or spend an evening chatting with friends!

When we experience spiritual wellbeing it is likely that some of us are, consciously or not, doing our little acts of appreciation, reconciliation, kindness, compassion and even political dissent. This kind of wellbeing also entails paying gentle attention to all the events that make up our day. The Buddha said that a person has to 'Be Awake!' to experience this inner enthusiasm. One does not have to be religious to be awake.

A friend recently referred me to St. Irenaeus, who famously said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Being awake, or fully alive, is itself a state of being that provides lucidity and equanimity.

Some of us are used to praying or meditating. The Dalai Lama once mentioned that by the time he gets to eat breakfast he has done several hours of meditation. People who know him have never failed to wonder at his childlike laughter and good humour, despite the burdens of office and political exile. Without doubt the time he spends meditating each morning plays a significant role in nurturing his joyful disposition.

But perhaps hope is ontological to human beings. It is embedded in our genes. One does not have to be religious to experience it. As the English poet, Alexander Pope said, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast..."

For the Christian theologian Jurgen Moltmann hope is a "passion for the possible". Hope and faith depend on each other and "Despair is the premature, arbitrary anticipation of the non-fulfilment of what we hope

for from God." For Moltmann hope is central to being a Christian. He identifies with the struggles of oppressed peoples; hope signifies a revolutionary openness to the future.

Hope also signifies our willingness to act, our determination to redefine the good life in terms of voluntary simplicity, away from the unwholesome seduction of consumerism, and ultimately, critically engaging with the unwholesome global economic system that creates grave injustice and emits greenhouse gases. The Buddha told his disciples in the Anguttara-Nikaya: "Abandon what is unwholesome, oh monks! One can abandon the unwholesome, oh monks! If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. If this abandoning of the unwholesome would bring harm and suffering, I would not ask you to abandon it. But as the cultivation of the wholesome brings benefit and happiness, therefore, I say, 'Cultivate what is wholesome!"

On a different tack I wish to relate a personal experience that took me a long time to understand. Many years ago, when I was a university student, a middle-aged Dutchman turned up at my hostel. His name was Br. Frank, and he was part of the well-known youth programme in Taize, France. Frank invited me, along with a few other Indian youth, to visit Taize and experience its spiritual vitality. I went to Taize and returned. It was a memorable experience of living in tents in the countryside and singing, praying and folk-dancing. But I was somewhat dissatisfied with the absence of political insight. In any case, I lost contact with Br.Frank after that.

A few years later Br. Frank suddenly turned up at my door step. I was pleased to see him, for he was an enticingly modest and simple man. I asked him if he had come from France, but to my surprise he told me he had been living in Calcutta for the past year, working at Mother Teresa's home. I admit that I was a little put off, since Mother Teresa was a symbol of charity to me, responding to the effects of an unjust society rather than dealing with the causes. However, I did not show my disapproval. I went on to ask what he was doing there. He replied: "I spend time with people who will die today, in a week or in a month." This was strong stuff, and I was taken aback. "Gosh Frank, you must feel depressed with all the time you spend with dying people!" was my spontaneous response. Frank's reply puzzled and shocked me: "No, on the contrary I feel very fulfilled and experience a lot of joy doing this work."

I was miffed by Frank's attitude. How could he say that he experienced joy in the context of such immense pain and suffering? Be that as it may, I never saw Frank after that and forgot him altogether. In recent years however, as the full magnitude of human suffering under climate change began to dawn on me, Frank's 'unfortunate' comments came back to me, and I saw what he was trying to say. I realised that if Frank had not felt mystical joy and fulfilment he had little to offer the dying people in Mother Teresa's home. They needed someone who could communicate positive energy to them in their final hours. If he had been depressed he would have been totally dysfunctional and could not have offered them solace or meaning.

I am sure that those who will be around to deal with the problems thrown up by climate change will need considerable spiritual and psychological strength to go about their compassionate engagements. The vision of Frank, and similar like-minded people, may not be the only meaningful ones, but I suspect they will be of some significance in the years to come. Although Frank was a prophetic mystic, he may not be easily acceptable to those who are more comfortable with pro-active theological approaches, whether they be Christian, Buddhist, Gandhian or Sufi.

Mahatma Gandhi was a liberation theologian of a non-marxist variety. He was fiercely committed to a decentralised and sustainable model of development. Of course the modernists thought he was antiquated; and now we are paying the price for not taking him seriously. The notion of 'hope' from the Bhagvad Gita which inspired him enormously was *nishkama karma*: action without attachment to the fruits of one's action. In other words, we engage with action not because we wish to see the results, but because it is necessary to act, and it is right to act. Concerning the issues around climate change that need urgent action, we may not all see positive results in our lifetime. But act we must, as our *dharma*, or sacred duty, enjoins us to. There is no reason to be pessimistic because of not achieving quick results. We are not even asked to hope, but to do our duty, do what is right. The spiritual fulfilment that this brings will be beyond despair. Some might say that it is even beyond our conventional sense of hope.

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