

New Year's Greetings 2009: The Promise of a Fresh Beginning

*“And our singing shall build
In the void's loose field
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield
We will take our plan
From the new world of man.
And our work shall be called the Promethean.”*

– Percy Bysshe Shelley

A New Year offers hope that freshly sown seeds of constructive projects will find richer soil, more sunlight and greater fulfillment of the ideals that nourish us. A natural cycle, the turning of the seasons, is given greater meaning by the human effort to sum up and then transform the lessons learned from the experiences of the past year into resolutions for a new year. Can we do better? Is there hope for peace, for prosperity, for real improvement in the quality of life throughout the globe? Will children be safer, better fed and offered true education? Will the future reflect the promise of an emerging world culture?

Graphic pictures of horrific violence and intimidating reports of economic crisis dominate the news and challenge rosy assumptions about globalization. Shock and then deeply felt despair settles into the psyche of many. For those who attended many of the programs sponsored by the Institute in 2008, it should not be a surprise that unstable economies with unjust distributions of resources have collapsed. From local to global, our speakers gave warnings while pointing to constructive experiments in the “imaginative use of spiritual, mental and material resources.” Around the globe, pioneers in the service of universal welfare can be found, as participants in the study group, Vision and Change, discovered. The number of non-profit organizations registered with the United Nations as advocates and servants of global welfare is a hundredfold greater than the number of national governments. Across the globe, millions fill the streets and polling stations to insist on their right to choose their leaders and define their vision of the common good.

Despite the gloom and signs of doom, are there not then also less visible signs of an embryonic world community based on shared aspirations and a common sense of right and wrong? Acts of violence evoke from millions of world citizens conscientious objection to the pain and suffering that the violence causes.

Shared modes of civic protest show up in public squares throughout the globe. The internet provides a non-stop venue for dialogue that no government can destroy. Teams of volunteers fly to help mitigate the effects of natural disasters. Billions of dollars are raised for foundations. Anyone can use the internet to give micro-financing to business enterprises in Africa.

The most recent Presidential election in the United States became a global event, evoking both shock and hopeful expectations that a better quality of leadership and more progressive world politics will support the aspirations of humanity. Have not the citizens of the world developed shared values, universal ethics and astute public opinion to the point where they will not tolerate the self-serving corruption of political and economic Leviathans? To the skeptics who point to the militant religious ideas that divide us, religious leaders from several traditions demonstrated recently in a remarkable PBS documentary, *Beyond Our Differences*, edited by Bill Moyers, that religious doctrines are now expressed in much more open-ended and universal terms than in the past.

The most visible issues for public dialogue during 2009 may be debated in long overdue discussions in centers of power on how to provide for the basic material needs of human beings in both rich and poor economies. Interestingly, the work of those who have developed, often in isolation, both the conceptual and practical foundation of local, sustainable economies may be given greater standing in revised conceptions of a healthy and sustainable global economy. While this reconceptualization of political and economic priorities is important, its implementation will require considerable strengthening of the human values and ethical duties that unite us. The foundation of a world community must be built on a deeper level of world culture and human understanding. Consequently, the Board of Trustees for the Institute of World Culture has chosen Aim # 5 in its Declaration of Interdependence to be the theme guiding its programs for 2009. That Aim reads:

“To deepen awareness of the universality of man’s spiritual striving and its rich expression in the religions, philosophies and literatures of humanity.”

Rich indeed is the variety of ideals and goals expressed in the religions, philosophies and literatures central to the cultural heritage of humanity. Without these ideals, life would be static and without purpose. Simply surviving is not a purpose -- at best it is a successful calculation. How might we understand the nature of humanity’s spiritual striving? To strive is to seek knowledge, improvement and fulfillment of potential. Does not this capacity for growth assume that there is a hidden potential in living creatures that we sense but do not know? Self-discovery is an integral part of spiritual striving. Is not this

potential discovered within ourselves shared by all that lives? Is not an recognition of human commonality an inevitable discovery emerging from our own halting efforts to truly know ourselves?

As we strive to know ourselves and thereby others with both intellectual and existential methods, will we discover a larger sense of what is real and true and good and beautiful? A larger, more universal, persisting and sacred reality is what the artists and philosophers, the mystics and creators of literature, the spiritual teachers and ethical leaders point to. Do we not read their writings and study their art with the hope we will learn what they have discovered? Do they not give us philosophical definitions and existential reports on what is spiritual? Do they not entice us into a discovery that we are part of a deeply felt human community as well a magnificent natural world? Then, also, do they not teach us the tough lessons of self-restraint and mutual responsibilities? Thus, the search for a spiritual identity becomes a pathway, self-consciously chosen, to non-violent and ethical participation in a worldwide, human community. The artists and philosophers give us the tools to make this journey of discovery and engagement. They inspire us and unlock our creative imagination, guiding us to become capable of fostering human fellowship among all races, nations and cultures.

To pursue answers to these questions and deepen our understanding of how human community can be nourished in a turbulent era will be the aim of the programs at the Institute of World Culture during 2009. We welcome your participation and wish to thank all who have given so much support in so many ways to the Institute. Your contributions in time, money and participation are essential to the life and future of a volunteer association. Thank you and best wishes for the New Year.

Dr. Carolyn Dorrance
President, Institute of World Culture