

The Evolution of a Culture of Peace

By Senator Douglas Roche, O.C.

Address to The Rotary Club of Edmonton

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I want to express my deep appreciation to The Rotary Club of Edmonton Foundation for giving me the Arch Dickson Award. For many years, I have been a great admirer of the Rotary Club. I have seen the work of Rotary Club members around the world, work that has directly benefited the development of peoples. To be associated with you today is a thrill for me.

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I would like to tell you why I remain optimistic that a culture of peace can be built in the world that will one day evolve into a recognized and enforceable right to peace.

Do not think for a moment that I am closing my eyes to the carnage that ravages so many areas of the world today. I do not overlook the gross violations of human rights, the stark poverty that afflicts billions, the relentless spread of weapons of mass destruction. I recognize all too well that we still live in a culture of war.

Many people despair that the human family can ever break out of this propensity to kill, maim and subjugate one another.

But I take another view.

There is actually being built today the foundation for a culture of peace. The essential elements are coming into focus. We must look deeper

than the daily headlines, which speak of continuing confrontations, to see and appreciate these new elements.

The idea of building a culture of peace to overwhelm the culture of war was first articulated by UNESCO in 1989 as a set of ethical values and forms of behaviour based on the universal values of life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights and equality between men and women.

These ideas were taken up by the United Nations, which adopted in 1999 a Programme of Action for the first decade of the 21st century. The Programme was launched in more than 100 countries with the support of the signatures of 74 million individuals. Nobel Peace Laureates drafted a public awareness campaign with the following highlights:

- *Respect all life:* Respect the life and dignity of each human being without discrimination or prejudice.
- *Reject violence:* Practice active non-violence, rejecting violence in all its forms: physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and social, in particular towards the most deprived and vulnerable, such as children and adolescents.
- *Share with others:* Share my time and material resources in a spirit of generosity to put an end to exclusion, injustice, and political and economic oppression.

- *Listen to understand:* Defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity, giving preference always to dialogue and listening without engaging in fanaticism, defamation, and the rejection of others.
- *Preserve the planet:* Promote consumer behaviour that is responsible and development practices that respect all forms of life and preserve the balance of nature on the planet.
- *Rediscover solidarity:* Contribute to the development of my community, with the full participation of women and respect for democratic principles, in order to create together new forms of solidarity.

Immediately after the launching of the Programme, terrorists struck on September 11, 2001, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq followed. The culture of war was given yet another boost; the culture of peace was set back. Nonetheless, as UNESCO Secretary-General Koichiro Matsuura says, “A global movement in the finest sense is emerging.” A sign of that emergence is the 10 million people who marched in cities across the world in opposition to the Iraq war.

The culture of peace is not just a program of an international agency. It is a social movement requiring a profound transformation in our thinking

and acting. No wonder governments are often perplexed by it, for the culture of peace challenges the status quo. It is a counter-cultural way of life to that of the culture of war. It should not be considered the technical solution to every world problem; rather, it supplies the moral vision for establishing a better individual and global order – a vision that can lead individuals away from despair and society from chaos.

The proponents of militarism have used the tragedy of September 11 to scare people into believing that only gigantic amounts of weaponry can head off the terrorism of the future. They have already eroded civil liberties in the guise of combating terrorism. But against this insidious thinking that war equals peace a new army is rising – not of soldiers but of highly informed, dedicated and courageous citizens of all countries who do see the perils ahead. There is a blossoming of both understanding and action in a renewed and alert civil society calling governments to account for paying only lip service to their human rights commitments. This new spirit of social activism, fed by instant worldwide electronic communication, provides hope for change.

We have not yet reached sufficient maturity of civilization to fully implement the right to peace. Governments, at least some of them, are still bent on using force as a tool of foreign policy, and use their power to

overcome the wishes of those who have turned against war. But this situation will not prevail forever. It will give way to those who demand the right to peace, just as the forces of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid gave way when the opposition became strong enough.

That is why developing the elements of a culture of peace – education, sustainable development, respect for all human rights, equality between men and women, democratic participation, understanding and tolerance, free flow of information, and human security for all – is so important.

A culture of peace will not only make the world a more human place, it will lead inexorably to the acquisition of the human right to peace. Future generations, when they have tasted the fruits of a culture of peace, will recognize almost intuitively that peace is their right. They will demand it. Our role, as the twenty-first century begins, is to nourish the seeds of peace so that the blossom appears.

The full blossom may not appear until my grandchildren, or their grandchildren, have grown up. I accept the prospect that I will not see the blossom. The immediate goal is for every generation to ensure that there will be a following generation. The advance of civilization thus far tells me that humanity is not fated for oblivion; indeed, the new interconnected human community is a source of strength to continue building the culture of

peace. I must feel this strength so that I can talk and write, in realistic terms, of achieving the human right to peace. I do feel the strength.

The strength of this moment gives me hope for the future, and hope is itself a powerful motivation for action. This hope for a decent future for humanity must awaken a universal sense of responsibility. When “we the peoples” seize this responsibility, the human right to peace will be assured.

I would like to add a P.S. about how I keep my own sense of perspective in these difficult days.

I have been deeply affected by the great cathedrals of Europe; I think of Notre Dame in Paris and Westminster Abbey in London. Through many parts of the world, the grandest architectural achievements of the great cathedrals, mosques, and temples testify to the ingenuity, skill, and toil of generations of dedicated people. It took decades, sometimes a century or more, for the grandeur of each to unfold. The craftsmen who laid the stones in the foundation did not live to see the whole structure and wonder at the power of their creation. Yet if they had not done their work meticulously, day by day, to ensure that every stone was precisely secured, the rising edifice would never have withstood the passing storms. That they would never see the end result of their work did not matter. They had seen the

design, they knew a step-by-step process was required, and they believed that every small detail of their work had value.

So, too, building a culture of peace requires daily dedication to fulfill the vision. We must have the patience of those who laboured on the great edifices of the world, content just to participate without expecting to see the end product. The end product is peace with social justice. And that is worth working for.