



Unlearning Intolerance

A seminar against intolerance and for respect and understanding

Faith, Dialogue and Integration

Universities Worldwide: Preparing the Global Citizenry

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My thanks to the UN Department of Public Information, the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) and to the Permanent Mission of India to the UN for hosting and organizing this event.

I am honored to sit on this distinguished panel as the president of the International Association of University Presidents, or IAUP. The IAUP is an all-volunteer organization of presidents, rectors and vice-chancellors of colleges and

universities around the world, founded in the UK in 1964, nearly 50 years ago. Today, our 400+ global members are organized into 25 regional councils. Totally apolitical, we are the “global voice of higher education,” the moral voice of the collective university presidency, across continents, cultures, languages and faith traditions.

We are proud to have been a founding partner of the UNAI and its ten guiding principles for global tertiary education. While IAUP embraces these ten principles with equal enthusiasm, for purposes of today’s panel, I plan to speak primarily to two of them: A commitment to encouraging global citizenship through education; and A commitment to promoting inter-cultural dialogue and understanding, and the “unlearning” of intolerance, through education.

Linguistically, of course, the word “university” shares roots with “universe” and “universal” and the sense of a unifying force of identity derived from many elements. As presidents and rectors, we have both the honor and the responsibility of leading our institutions – individual and collectively - in ethical and socially responsible ways, as we prepare new generations of citizens.

Over the course of the last year, while visiting our member schools as IAUP president, I have had occasion to attend university commencement / graduation ceremonies in China, the Republic of Georgia, Jamaica and here in the US. While each was strikingly different in the language spoken, the music played, the native dress and the local customs which framed the event, more striking was the common elements across these cultural settings, from ancient China to newly independent Georgia and Jamaica. Graduates were uniformly scrubbed and formally coiffed; parents (many of whom themselves did not possess a college degree) were reflective on their children’s future and uniformly proud w/ the same moistness around the eyes; cameras were ubiquitous as similar configurations of family, classmates and professors were digitally recorded for posterity; too many speeches were given and most of them were too long; there was uniformly a felt sense that this was a very significant event, a doorway from one stage of life to another and from one level of possibility to another. The lives

of the graduates and their families had been changed by the culmination of years of sacrifice and hard work represented in these ceremonies.

At the same time, I would guess that if we polled the faculties who had prepared their students for this auspicious occasion, and asked them what exactly had been their objective for the graduates as they assume their post-degree lives, we would find a varied and very interesting range of results.

In the USA today, there is a strong emphasis on preparing college students for careers. There is of course a venerable tradition in the international academic community that we prepare scholars and researchers in particular disciplines. Many would contend, particularly those most imbued with the liberal arts traditions, that we prepare citizens to whom we entrust the future of the social order with a solid foundation in critical thinking and other habits of mind that serve throughout the life course as tools to navigate whatever unforeseeable life challenges and opportunities that might appear.

My sense is that our national systems by and large reinforce rather than challenge the orthodoxies and shared assumptions that continue to instill identities in our students that define us as different from – others rather than identities that ground us in universalities or experiences of ourselves centering in felt commonalities. This – together with the underlying culturally specific socialization that precedes our formal tertiary education – is the heart of what needs to be “unlearned,” for it complicates true tolerance that is rooted in a deep understanding, appreciation, transcendence and ultimately celebration of difference. Whereas “learning” can be passive and in large part the absorption of surrounding social forces, “unlearning” requires active discernment and intentionality. I believe that “unlearning” is more difficult than “learning” – and often the more important of the two.

A relatively new objective that has emerged in college and university mission statements is the preparation of “global citizens.” My observation is that for many schools this is addressed in sending and receiving students – and sometimes professors – in international exchange. This certainly is an important element of

broadening individuals' understanding of cultural relativity vs. a more parochial sense of the world as seen through one's own cultural lens.

In my own experience as a young educator, I spent a year as a teacher in Laos, in Southeast Asia, and another in Algeria, in North Africa. I have often said that those two years have influenced my life view and values more than all of my formal education taken together. In Laos, I ran an English language school and taught English to local Buddhist monks on the side - while the war in neighboring Vietnam would occasionally spill across our borders. One day the monks asked me in class who Christ was. I replied that Christ was to Christians as Buddha was to Buddhists. This response was met with a loud chorus of "one Buddha" and I feared that I had somehow blasphemed. Later, I asked some of the monks who had become friends to teach me about Buddha. They exchanged quizzical glances, and then one stated simply "be with us."

In Algeria, not long after that former colony's hard fought victory in a brutal war of independence with France, I lived and worked amongst the indigenous Berbers who had paid an inordinately high price for that independence. My students, who were mostly children of the war dead, took me to visit their villages and the graves of their fathers and taught me about Berber customs and traditions, and the ways in which these were fundamentally distinct from the majority Arab and Muslim mores.

I returned to the US after these two years a profoundly changed and different young man than the one who had departed two years earlier. The comfort and security of my worldview – derived from my very privileged white western Middle Class educated early life – had been shattered, never again to serve as foundational organizing principle for my identity.

As I observe us interact amongst ourselves within the IAUP, I have a number of reactions relative to today's topic.

One is, what a unique and wonderful laboratory we have to practice and refine our own global citizenship with one another – and then to take our "lessons learned" home to our own universities. If we as presidents are good students,

“unlearn” well and become true global citizens, we in turn have the potential for enormous impact on the thousands of students, faculty and staff we collectively oversee.

We are, after all, African, Latin American, Asian, Indian, Pakistani, European and citizens of the Americas. We are men and women, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Hindi, agnostics and adherents of tribal faiths and customs that are not represented in the world’s major faith traditions. We are gay and straight. We suffer and navigate in microcosm the very divides and differences that we all see in the world around us.

We have not fully reconciled differences between our Middle Eastern members of different backgrounds. Some Japanese members of our recent delegation to the celebration of a Chinese member school’s 100th anniversary elected at the last moment not to participate, on the recommendation of their Foreign Office, due to tensions at that time between Japan and China. We welcome participants from both north and South Korea. We struggle with the disproportionate distribution of resources, wealth and income amongst our members and our regions of the world. Some of us drink alcohol or eat pork and others do not. We participate privately in our faith traditions in the various ways prescribed. Our LGBT members “walk softly” in the organization out of respect for the cultural sensitivities of many of our members.

Our member presidents alternately host our meetings at their home universities; during this triennium – we alternate the presidency every three years – we will have come together in the US, Austria, Columbia, the Republic of Georgia, Mexico, China and Jamaica. We visit one another when we travel in different parts of the world, and we collaborate in regional programs. We serve as consultants and confidants to one another and we design exchange programs between our schools. We hold panels such as this and symposia in our meetings addressing our common challenges and those of our particular regions.

My view is that we ***experientially and incrementally*** unlearn the intolerances and culturally imbedded assumptions of our early lives as we interact with one another. As a psychologist, I am informed by a few theoretical and conceptual

constructs that assist me in this view. One is cognitive dissonance: we tolerate poorly holding two opposing views of reality simultaneously. We generally resolve this discomfort by shedding a prior view and embracing the one that is more consistent with our current experience. Another is the concept of a “psychic deep structure” promulgated by Carl Jung and others in the west and throughout ancient traditions around the world which posits that we all start from and return to the same shared/ universal soul or self or center of being and that our various experiences of difference are, in contrast, superficial and even illusory. So – any intolerance in our hearts is learned and obstructs our living fully from our true natures. The extent to which we are successful in then unlearning these pesky intolerances reveals and reunites us with our true and common and shared essence.

In my own institution, Sofia University, in Palo Alto, California, where I also have the honor to serve as president, one of our core values is that spirituality is fundamental to our shared nature and that the specific paths to living or integrating our individual experience of spirituality are equally deserving of respect and embrace. We therefore proceed from an overt value of tolerance, respect and understanding across faith traditions. We engage active dialogue and ritual in our curricula seeking to integrate multiple traditions both experientially and academically.

My inauguration as president was framed in interfaith ritual where one of our founders, a Sufi Sheik, offered an opening blessing together with a visiting Tibetan Buddhist Lama, the Stanford Gospel Choir performed, the president of a major area Jesuit university brought a greeting - and a ritual preceding my investiture designed by the Sofia community included an African priestess, a gay rabbi, a Wiccan priestess, a nurse become spiritual guide and a former Catholic priest. Sofia University remains nonetheless a bold experiment and a work in progress, as we all find in the day to day that we have a great deal of “unlearning” still to do and that we revert reflexively in spite of ourselves to our learned intolerances far more readily than we live from our aspirational deep affinities.

I recently met a gentleman named Ashok Kulkarni, Indian by birth and a Nuclear Physicist by training. Professor Kulkarni serves as Deputy President of the University of Technology in Jamaica, where we had the opportunity to converse and compare notes in the hotel lobby prior to the recent graduation ceremonies there, after which we wound up sitting next to one another on the stage. I loved our conversation and would have enjoyed more time together. Two of the professor's observations were particularly relevant to our topic today: one, that our disciplines, psychology and nuclear physics, share ultimately the challenge and the goal of seeking and realizing ultimate truths (albeit by very different paths) and two, that Hindu philosophy offers a wonderful tool and resource for our work together at Sofia University.

IAUP enjoys a very rich partnership with the Qatar Foundation, with whom we were one of the original architects of the World Innovation Summit on Education, or WISE, recently held for the fourth consecutive year in Doha. I was not able to attend this year, but have been deeply affected in prior years by the research findings presented, most particularly the direct and powerful correlations between education and life expectancy, diminishment of conflict, cultural understanding and standards of health, including reducing the spread of infectious diseases of various kinds.

Recently and relatedly, the World Bank released a restatement of their commitment to fighting poverty and helping developing countries invest in their education systems. The statement embraces the achievement of the [Millennium Development Goals](#) as its main priority and, particularly, "eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education." The World Bank has recognized that there is no investment more effective for achieving development goals than educating girls.

In perhaps an even more challenging frontier in unlearning intolerance, The United Nations Human Rights Office has recently released a new publication, Born Free and Equal, that outlines core legal obligations that countries have for their LGBT people – a value strongly embraced as well by the UN Secretary General.

I would suggest that respect for all faith traditions, eliminating gender disparity and embrace of LGBT rights are all desirable attributes of the global citizenry that we aspire to create in tertiary education across the globe. At the same time, I recognize that we are all challenged at the enormity of what we must as individuals and in the collective “unlearn” in each and all of these regards – and by the enduring vestiges of deeply embedded intolerances from our socialization and cultural traditions.

We have the guiding wisdom here of the venerable Nelson Mandela, who has said that “Education is the powerful weapon we can use to change the world.”

My belief is that we begin where we are and take one step at a time on the path of unlearning together – hereby preparing a robust global citizenry through our formal educational processes and our own intentional work - in the great spirit of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, who has brought us all together today.