

# *Human Rights, Ethics and Globalization*

Platform address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, December 30, 2007  
by **Heather Grady**, Trustee

Good morning. It's a pleasure and a privilege to be giving the Platform Address this morning, my first time at Ethical Culture. My day job, as Andra Miller said, is working as the Policy Director for a human rights organization called Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative.<sup>2</sup> In that connection, I frequently write speeches and articles on human rights and globalization, and today I will bring these topics together as well with the concept of 'ethics', and share some thoughts about my own area of work.

When I was thinking about how to introduce the idea of 'human rights' as it relates to our beliefs in how people should treat each other – one of the foundations of Ethical Culture – I remembered a conversation I had not long ago during a trip to Africa. I was dining at the home of a Swedish friend whose ten-year-old twin daughters were studying the French Revolution in school. He asked them what was the most important thing they were learning about the French Revolution. 'The storming of the Bastille?' they ventured. No, he said. 'Marie Antoinette?' they suggested. No, he said. Finally he looked across at me and said, 'It's just what Heather works on – human rights. That is where our notion of human rights started.' Indeed, we can trace our contemporary concepts of human rights to the British Bill of Rights of 1689, the US Declaration of Independence of 1776, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789.<sup>3</sup>

I often say that the struggle for human rights cannot be understood without an appreciation for the question of power: who holds it, who does not. Citizens of countries where power is exercised *fairly* may rarely think about human rights. But past struggles against autocracy, and struggles demanding the consent of the governed that shaped those early documents, are the same kinds of struggles that are happening across the world today, and for which human rights holds the promise of a more just future.

I have spent most of my adult life working in the field of international development, that is, working to overcome poverty and suffering in developing countries. At local, national and international levels, we work to build institutions and policies that will lead to social and economic justice and dignity for all. I had an epiphany of sorts about the power of *human rights*, in particular, during a visit I made in the year 2000 to Cambodia. I worked at the time as East Asia Regional Director for Oxfam Great Britain, and we had a long-standing program in Cambodia – one of the first agencies to go in after Pol Pot was deposed in 1979, in fact. This program covered many aspects of development, from agriculture to education.

Oxfam one year earlier had launched a global education campaign that was premised on every human being having the right to education, no matter who they are, nor how poor their country. An Oxfam staff member was showing me his project that helped the government to provide education to very poor villagers.

I said that it fit perfectly with the global campaign because it demonstrated how to realize everyone's right to education. He said, 'Oh, we don't have that right here in Cambodia.' And I said, 'Yes you do.' And he explained that in rich countries or even

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

<sup>2</sup> [www.realizingrights.org](http://www.realizingrights.org)

<sup>3</sup> Other traditions going back even further have elements of what we would today consider human rights, such as the Constitution of Medina.

middle-income countries like Malaysia that may be true, but surely not in a country as poor as Cambodia. Here was an intelligent and fairly well-educated individual who was unfamiliar with the rights guaranteed through international human rights law, irrespective of what is mandated under national law.

There followed a lively discussion about whether or not having such rights was at all practical, what it meant for poor people in poor countries, and what it meant for the programs and policy work of development agencies like Oxfam, and the United Nations. These agencies have used the concept of rights to move international development assistance from the notion of 'charity' to the notion of 'responsibility' and the ability of people to 'claim' rights. Such agencies were started in order to 'help the poor', no doubt. In the case of Oxfam, it was started by Quakers and other good-hearted individuals in Oxford, England during the Second World War collecting money and goods for Greeks suffering under a German blockade.

But a rights-based approach used by international development and human rights organizations, including Realizing Rights, the one I work for now, embodies the notion of responsibilities that cross national boundaries. And this approach requires global governance institutions that are structured in part around these duties.

That is, when it comes to human rights, States have obligations to respect, protect and fulfill them, but individuals and other 'organs of society', as the Universal Declaration calls them, also have duties to community.

Through our discussion I found that my Cambodian colleague felt more empowered, knowing that his government was part of the community of nations that was a signatory to this commitment to universal education and other human rights. And he also ended up feeling a stronger connection to people in other countries because he shared with them the same set of rights and responsibilities.

I relate this story to highlight an important way that the field of international development has evolved over the last two decades or so, in how we conceive of our individual and national responsibilities to others. We are building on a system of shared values that has developed over time, and that obviously is tested over time by tragedies like the HIV/AIDS crisis, the humanitarian conflict in Darfur, the 30,000 children who die *each day* from preventable causes, and simply the grinding poverty that still faces a quarter of the world's population today.

The roots of human rights organizations, and the codifying of how we should treat each other in a more formal sense, can be traced back to the crafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which this month passed its fifty-ninth birthday. When we try to promote a greater respect for human rights today, we are sometimes told that human rights are a throwback, that they are anachronistic, and that today's world is too fractured, and our threats too complex, to live by one set of principles and standards as a human race. But think about what the world was like in the years leading up to the signing of the Universal Declaration in 1948. The world had been rent by the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust. The first nuclear bombs had been dropped in two cities in Japan. And the Cold War had begun, with its ominous threats of unimaginable suffering to civilians.

Mary Ann Glendon's book *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* gives a detailed description of the genesis of the Universal Declaration. In early 1947, the newly formed United Nations gathered a remarkable group of men and women to begin working on a draft of the first international 'Bill of

Rights'. This was done under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, who later, justifiably, looked on this as the greatest accomplishment of her life. Eleanor, of course, had a long relationship with the Society for Ethical Culture, including as an early supporter and participant in our Encampment for Citizenship, a summer youth program begun in 1944 under the Society's leader Algernon Black.

The drafting work on the Declaration was not considered core to the purposes of the United Nations. It happened in response to humanitarian and religious institutions bringing pressure on the individual countries of the UN who had promised to never again allow such violations of human dignity as had taken place in the previous decade. And the emphasis on dignity is not an unimportant one: In the resulting Universal Declaration, Article One begins, 'All human beings are born free and equal, in dignity and rights.' Dignity comes first. And it continues: 'They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.' (By the way, the language of the Declaration is not what we would call today gender-sensitive, but we can at least revise it in our minds.)

One of the Americans best known at that time for championing causes based on ethical considerations was Eleanor Roosevelt, particularly on women's rights, ending racial discrimination, and improvement of housing and working conditions. She would do so even in opposition to the policies of her husband's administration, though he reassured her that it didn't matter because, 'The whole world knows I can't control you.' I might add that some of the pundits of the time, on the other hand, said that FDR's prayer was, 'Dear God, Please make Eleanor tired'.

The drafters of the Universal Declaration consulted with religious leaders from around the world to underscore the point that although Western legal systems were key in developing human rights discourse, the broader ethical, religious and cultural traditions of the world can be found as well when one looks for them.

The work of the drafters went quickly. In less than two years they crafted a document that would stand as one of the normative and ethical pillars of a new international system (the other two being the 1948 Genocide Convention and the Nuremberg Principles of International Criminal law). Together these documents guided how nations should treat each others' citizens; allowed scrutiny of how a nation treated its own citizens; and indicated that individuals' and 'all organs of society' should promote human rights.

In addition to proclaiming the civil and political rights that most Americans recognize, the Universal Declaration also affirms that everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, safe water, health care, education, work, and housing. It expressly recognizes the inherent dignity 'of all members of the human family' as 'the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'.

In the intervening years an extensive body of international law has been agreed by States aimed at bettering the human condition. This body of law includes international treaties defining universal rights and freedoms and setting out States' duties to uphold them. In addition, human rights norms and standards have been created or have evolved at regional and international levels.

Many of us who work in the field of human rights have been troubled by the false dichotomy that has often been made between different areas of rights – civil and political, on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural on the other. This harks back to different emphases that existed between those founding documents I mentioned earlier of the 1600s and 1700s.

The influence of Rousseau and other European thinkers emphasized equality and ‘fraternity’, and joined duties to the notion of rights, as well as limits. The state was seen as a guarantor of rights and able to assist and protect those in need. Early notions of public obligations to the poor later became the basis for economic and social rights.

The English and American tradition of rights emphasized individual liberty and initiative and evinced a more general mistrust of government, with less emphasis on social solidarity and equality. The Soviet Union and other Communist countries would later emphasize equality over freedom, and social and economic rights over political and civil liberties.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, crucially, wove these strains together, and synthesized notions of rights and duties. The drafters created a document that they believed represented principles so basic that no state could openly disavow them. But this joining of concepts was one of the casualties of the Cold War, and it has taken a series of UN conferences and the tireless work of many human rights advocates challenging this false dichotomy. A campaign to be launched next December by Amnesty International, whose hallmark has been freedom from fear and the promotion of civil and political rights, is provisionally titled the Rights of the Poor. It will weave together more solidly the notions of political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights – and the duties we all have to promote them. On the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration we have the chance to overcome this division once and for all.

In the work of my organization and many others, we draw on international human rights standards to, as we say, ‘be the compass that charts the course of globalization – a more ethical globalization’.

At the heart of this is the notion that these standards not only provide a legal basis for the behavior of institutions and individuals, and legal remedies for violations, but also a normative framework for our obligations and duties as individuals - to what is just, what is right, and what is fair. Human rights are both law, and a broader set of endorsed values. Moreover, in our increasingly globalized world, promoting human rights rests on the idea that we have obligations to people whom we have never met, who live in countries we have never visited. As one academic phrased it, the field of human rights involves an evolving transnational project to define an ethical baseline for the governance of human society.<sup>4</sup>

So what is the value of a human rights discourse within globalization and within the arena of ‘international development’?

First, it shifts the discourse, the policy-making, and the practice from a discussion of charitable aid contributions that help meet people’s needs, to the notion of rights and entitlements that people individually or collectively can claim. These entitlements correspond to obligations and duties of States, and increasingly to non-state actors such as corporations.

Second, it shifts the discussion from one of aspirational goals that will require trade-offs between different types of needs - for example, whether to provide support to education, to health care, or to expanding decent work opportunities – to one in which governments recognize there is a *minimum floor* of human rights standards which they are obligated to progressively realize. The notion of progressive realization takes into

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Robert Winthrop, George Washington University, 2002.

account that poorer countries will have more difficulty guaranteeing basic entitlements to all their citizens and may have a lower starting point.

Third, and importantly, it shifts the focus from individuals and communities as *recipients* of development assistance, to a focus on people as *agents* of their own development, claiming their rights in a world that is, after all, rich with resources. To use a phrase I heard on this platform a few months ago, human rights can help steer us toward a more equitable distribution of our communally created wealth.

The notion of human rights applied to international obligations and aid was strengthened in September 2000 during the Millennium Summit at the UN when 189 of the world's leaders gathered in New York and signed the Millennium Declaration.

The Declaration committed the signers to 'ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's peoples'. Then Secretary General Kofi Annan described globalization as... 'a new connectivity among economic actors and activities throughout the world. Globalization has been made possible by the progressive dismantling of barriers to trade and capital mobility, together with fundamental technological advances... Its integrative logic seems inexorable, its momentum irresistible.'

But Kofi Annan and the world leaders gathered understood the increasing backlash against globalization to have come about precisely because its benefits and opportunities are so concentrated among a few countries, and unevenly spread within them. Its costs are unevenly distributed as well – in the stripping of environmental assets in developing countries without fair compensation; in foreign investment patterns that can impoverish local communities as easily as support them; and in the price we are paying in climate change, which is exacting its heaviest toll on poor people in poor countries who are precisely not those who have caused it. Globalization for many has meant greater vulnerability to unfamiliar and unpredictable forces that bring economic instability and social dislocation.

In our global age, decisions made in the political corridors and the boardrooms of corporations in rich countries can limit the ability of poor people in developing countries to have a decent life. For example, faster turn-around times for fashions each year, and limiting clothing inventories in retail operations, requires 'just in time' production on assembly lines, which in turn increases the proportion of short-term contracts for factory workers in developing countries, especially affecting women. Not only does this make their work more precarious. They also fear getting pregnant or falling ill because their contract will not be renewed, and they have no social protection to fall back on.

Powerful agricultural lobbies in the US pressure congressional leaders to maintain high subsidies, and these directly undermine the lives of poor cotton and rice farmers in developing countries. Farmers in Ghana have said to me: 'My government tells us the US subsidies will never end, and so we must grow something else, but what else can we grow and market from the arid soil in this remote village?'

And stricter rules on intellectual property as applied to medicines, pushed by the pharmaceutical industry, deny poor people access to affordable drugs to fight diseases like HIV/AIDS, which daily claims the lives of thousands of people in Africa and elsewhere. When Ministries of Health in developing countries try to fight back, they are warned not to rock the boat for fear of trade sanctions on *their* export industries.

But those of us in rich countries, too, see globalization affecting our daily welfare. Opportunities cross boundaries; so do threats and risks. Environmental decay and climate change; economic instability and job loss; refugee flows and migration; international

terrorism – all of these require collective international responses. The forces of integration reinforce the need for global standards for rights and responsibilities. A world linked by commerce and communication must also be one linked by compassion. And a global economic system must still be steered by values and ethics.

The Millennium Declaration signed by the world's leaders took this into account. It explicitly called for a much greater recognition of duties, obligations and responsibilities between States to foster shared and inclusive development across all nations.

From it were derived the eight Millennium Development Goals that cover health, education, access to water and other areas – targets to reach by 2015 that have helped galvanize public and private efforts and political will.

The Millennium Summit agreed on a set of international values deemed essential to international relations in the twenty-first century: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, and respect for the environment. It took steps toward a new international consensus that explicitly recognized how social, economic and political justice is indispensable to peace, development and security. And it underscored that, while building an ethical globalization is not *exclusively* dependent on human rights, it needs to include the recognition of shared responsibility for the universal protection of human rights.

Sadly, the optimism, hope and shared purpose crafted there were shattered by the events of 9/11 one year later, from which we have yet to recover our sense of moving forward together as all of humanity. Indeed, the events of 9/11, and even more so the response to them, have undermined the assumptions we make about what we have in common; about the legal protections we must never violate; and about the rule of law that must be respected. I needn't here go into how much more fragile our global social compact is today than it was a few short years ago.

Despite this rollback, the power of human rights, and drawing on our shared responsibilities across the planet, can be illustrated in many ways. I want to expand on one area - employment and how people earn their livelihoods.

The 2002 World Commission on a Fair Globalization found that the way people assess globalization – whether it is good or bad - is determined, first and foremost, by how it affects their ability to make a living. The Universal Declaration contains 30 Articles, some directly related to employment. Article 23 reads in part: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

And Article 25 reads: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.

These ideas are built on the 'social justice' agenda that has guided the earliest UN institution - the International Labor Organization - since its founding in 1919. That social justice agenda can be summarized as 'the right of all human beings to lead their active lives in dignity and with respect for their humanity'. More recently, the 1998 ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work provided for a wide range of basic labor rights, including freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, elimination of forced labor and child labor, and the application of core labor standards that apply internationally to all nations.

These international instruments have helped make significant progress in public policy in the area of employment – just as human rights instruments relating to education have implications for national public policy on education. But one need only look at the situation of labor today in the US, or in most developing countries, to see that there is a huge gap between States’ obligations and the reality facing individuals and marginalized groups.

This is particularly true for certain categories of people, for example undocumented migrants. Moreover, our increasingly globalized economy might lead us to think that both governments and corporations would agree to global legally binding frameworks that increase consistency across borders and attention to the rule of law. But so far the reverse is happening. In other words, both governments and businesses tend to turn a blind eye to labor and other rights abuses, especially when they are in distant lands.

Nevertheless, many organizations are using human rights standards to reorient the priorities of governments, as well as to hold the private sector responsible for respecting them.

A particularly interesting area of work is business and human rights, which has grown parallel to, and in some sense from, the longer-lived Corporate Social Responsibility movement. One of the individuals who pioneered the Corporate Social Responsibility movement is Alice Tepper Marlin, who founded the New York-based organization Social Accountability International. She has worked on many innovations in how people view the responsibilities of business from the 1960s onwards. At that time, and in response to the interest of some religious and other groups to ensure their endowments and other funds were not invested in the military-industrial complex or the Viet Nam War, she created the ‘Peace Portfolio’.

She went on to do reports that analyzed companies in terms of civil rights violations and environmental records, initiating in the 1970s a Campaign for a Cleaner Corporation that identified the ‘Toxic Ten’. She and others working on these issues realized that companies wanted to have good reputations and a good record of being responsible – to be a company people are drawn to, not one that people avoid. In the 1980s she started the America’s Corporate Conscience Awards, for which businesses, business media and the public had a great appetite.

During the last three decades Corporate Social Responsibility (also known as CSR) has grown to be a significant international movement, and a business in itself. The United Nations embraced this approach, and several years ago UN Secretary General Kofi Annan established the UN Global Compact, a voluntary membership-based initiative with a set of core principles, including some human rights standards, which thousands of businesses around the world joined. Similar processes proliferated. The Global Reporting Initiative, based in Amsterdam, requires its members to do rigorous reporting on an extensive list of important indicators including human rights and the environment. Industry-specific initiatives like the Kimberley Process Diamond Certification Scheme guard against ‘blood diamonds’. And the whole Fair Trade movement certifies ethically-sourced coffee, chocolate and other products.

But many human rights organizations, and even some businesses themselves, are concerned about the emphasis on voluntary processes, and criticize the Global Compact and similar initiatives as having insufficient accountability built in, and insufficient objective monitoring of performance. The hottest discussion in the field of corporate responsibility today is around the need for global legally enforceable standards; for a

robust monitoring and enforcement mechanism; and greater clarity about the meaning of the standards themselves.

In 2005 the United Nations appointed Harvard Professor John Ruggie as UN Special Representative on Business and Human Rights. His tasks include, first, identifying and clarifying standards of corporate responsibility and accountability for business; second, elaborating on the role of States in regulating business; and third, clarifying concepts such as ‘complicity’ and the ‘sphere of influence’ of companies. John has been hard at work during this period, you can imagine.

Many human rights organizations have been critical because he did not build on the previous UN Norms on Transnational Business that had been in the works in the preceding years. The international business community, and I think especially the US business community, fought hard against these Norms, not surprisingly. Many of them simply do not want any new legal standards through which they could be held liable for human rights violations. My organization and many others have been working with John Ruggie to support his research, analysis, and what will be a full report to the UN Human Rights Council early next year.

This will set out some clearer ideas of States’ duties to protect their citizens from business human rights violations; companies’ duties to respect human rights; and accountability mechanisms that go beyond the voluntary initiatives.

In the meantime, there are several important business groupings across the world working on incorporating human rights into business practice, including one in which I am involved, an international group based in London, called the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights (or BLIHR), whose 13 member companies have pledged to ‘find practical ways of applying the aspirations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights within a business context and to inspire other businesses to do likewise’.

Felix Adler, the Founder of Ethical Culture, identified ‘existential pains’ confronting humankind, and one of them was the pain of being unable to bring our personal ethics into our business or professional lives. He wrote of the ‘strain of the conscience’ felt by men and women who are eager to achieve consistency in their conduct, but:

‘...do not see how to do it because they find that the ethical standard which they acknowledge in their private relations, and which they would like to expand so as to cover their business and professional relations, their conduct as citizens, is incapable of such expansion. In other words, they have a moral standard to hold to when they deal as individuals with other individuals, but find themselves destitute of sufficient moral standard to guide them where they are required to act as members of groups. The absence of a standard regulating the morality of groups is to-day the great, the crying defect.’<sup>5</sup>

Adler, of course, saw and wrote about the dangers of unfettered capitalism, when its base motives were self-satisfaction and accumulation of great wealth, rather than creating economic systems run for the aim of social betterment.

Is there not, then, an enormous contribution that can come from expanding the global dialogue on the responsibilities of business and clarifying the standards below which none are allowed to fall? This would *not* obviate the need for business colleagues – and their stakeholders, including local communities and consumers - resolving the everyday ethical dilemmas that businesses face. But given the enormous power of multinational

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<sup>5</sup> *Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal*, pp 25.

corporations in today's world – dozens of them now have budgets larger than many national economies – this is surely one of the most important endeavors of this century.

The imperative for this grows stronger as the source of investment – the countries and companies who operate internationally – grows wider each year. In other words, if a US company's mining investments in West Africa contribute to human rights violations – by displacing local communities or harming their health, for example – and that company improves its behavior because of pressure from the shareholders or activists back here in the US – will a Chinese company investing in the same community feel similarly pressured to respect human rights? That's very unlikely. Only creating a level playing field through legally binding international standards is likely to make a difference – and this of course is not a simple undertaking.

And what of the role of us as citizens? We know that companies will not automatically respect human rights. When it comes to either government or company responsibilities, citizen scrutiny and action in the case of grievances is essential. But how does this happen in a globalized world?

The political philosopher Iris Marion Young posed this question: 'Do people in relatively free and affluent countries such as the United States, Canada or Germany have responsibilities to try to improve working conditions and wages of workers in far-off parts of the world who produce items those in the more affluent countries purchase?' She cited the 'anti-sweatshop' activism of recent decades, as well as the belief of some others that such activism is absurd. Her work helps those wrestling with such ethical considerations think through the underlying assumptions, as well as the implications.

Some would say, if workers in far-away places work in awful conditions, 'we have not caused them, and we are not in control of the factors that would remedy them. Thus it makes no sense to claim that we have moral responsibilities to try to change them.' In a 2004 article in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Young posited:

*...a conception of responsibility that can make sense of...any claims of responsibility that members of a society might be said to have toward harms and injustices of distant strangers.' This fits not within the dominant conception of responsibility as liability, but a different conception of responsibility, political responsibility, to correspond to these claims.*

In the liability model, she wrote, we the faraway consumers are not the cause of the injustice the workers suffer; so it is not *our* place to get involved in labor regulation. The owners and managers of the factories and the governments where these violations take place are primarily responsible. In this model, people look to assign responsibility derived from legal reasoning to find guilt or fault for harm. This is backward-looking in its purpose: it reviews what has taken place to assign responsibility, and exact punishment or compensation.

In reality, in such cases of exploitative working conditions, owners, managers and local governments often cite the impossibility of being fairer to their workers. They point to the structural economic and social processes that, usually due to stiff competition in the market, make it impossible for them to operate differently. This has to do with investment, production, and profit relations that connect producers to far-away consumers. Do these connections bring responsibilities to understand and connect with those whose lives are affected, changing the structures so that specific violations begin to disappear?

The notion of shared responsibilities, underpinned by universal human rights standards and obligations, challenges those who argue that we cannot assume transnational responsibilities – those who argue that the farthest we can extend our sphere of influence and responsibility is to others who live within the same political jurisdiction.

The political philosopher Thomas Pogge goes far in saying that obligations of justice do extend globally, so that better-off people actually hold obligations to the worse-off. He believes that this is the case whether or not we are aware of the implications of our actions. In other words, if we purchase goods produced in a sweatshop that immiserates its workers, or drink coffee produced by child labor, we are responsible even if we are unaware of the outcomes. It assumes that we each hold a responsibility toward those to whom we are connected by our actions as a consumer – at the very least a responsibility to gain more knowledge of the source of what we purchase.

Iris Marion Young questioned this conclusion as well. She worried that today's world, with its high level of economic exchanges, migration, and density of communications, risks losing a sense of individuals as bearers of responsibility altogether. She noted that, 'People have difficulty reasoning about individual responsibility with relation to outcomes produced by large-scale social structures in which millions participate, but of which none is the sole or primary cause'. This is even more difficult given the shortage of dependable transnational regulatory structures monitoring social and other outcomes.

Young elaborated on the concept of political responsibility of the philosopher Hannah Arendt. The word political used in this way does not refer to governments, but more broadly to activities in which people organize collectively to regulate or transform some aspect of their shared social conditions. Not surprisingly for her time, Arendt used the nation-state as her paradigm of such a collective. But we must go beyond that now, since globalization has strengthened the structural connections among people in the world – widening them and at the same time making them denser.

Our imperative, I think, is to strengthen the notion of political responsibility in a globalized world, and to go well beyond the liability model that has its purpose in some situations, but a rather limited one. 'Political responsibility,' Young wrote, 'seeks not to reckon debts, but aims rather to bring about results, and thus depends on the actions of everyone who is in a position to contribute to the results.' Moreover, while the idea of duty spells out how specific obligations are to be discharged, the notion of responsibility leaves open to individual thought and judgment how one takes up that responsibility.

That is the essence of the ethics that we Ethical Culturists aim to live by.

Political responsibility *also* implies a *shared* responsibility. The call to action, then, is to enjoin others to reflect on and acknowledge their participation in the structural processes that may be harmful to others, and to organize means of changing them to reduce the injustices.

This does not mean, of course, that all of us are responsible for all injustices. There is a division of labor in political responsibility. Each of us must examine our own positions within institutions, our skills and our capacities, to discern where our action will most effectively coordinate with others to bring about greater justice. We may also, as individuals, decide to tackle the human rights injustices that are most egregious, even though they may be farthest from our own existence.

The world is still full of injustices, and despite our vast ability to communicate across the globe, we are still profoundly unaware of the indignities and indecencies that take

place every day around the globe. But I also want to note some of the successes we have had in human rights and development. I began with a story about education. Since Oxfam and the Global Coalition on Education began campaigning on this eight years ago, 48 million more children are in school. In the last few years, millions of people are newly receiving treatment for HIV/AIDS. Due to this treatment HIV-positive mothers, for example, are able to be with their children as they grow. Developing countries have challenged the World Trade Organization for imposing trade rules that undermine their farmers' livelihoods. Women's rights organizations have challenged legislation and practices unfair to women across the world. And since 1999, poor countries receiving debt relief have more than doubled the amount they are spending on fighting poverty.

What more can we do as a Society to promote human rights? There are many possibilities. We can place our endowment into Socially Responsible Investment Funds. We can create an Ethical Sourcing policy so that an increasing proportion of our purchasing meets internationally agreed standards. We can uphold core labor standards, including freedom of association, in our premises, and through our purchasing and contracting services. We can mitigate the disproportionate harm from climate change wreaked on people in poor countries by increasing the fuel efficiency of our building. We can use our membership at the United Nations to more closely monitor how accountable *our* leaders, and the world's leaders, are to the Millennium Declaration and other commitments they have signed.

The full promotion of human rights requires solidarity between all humans on the basis of the inviolable and equal dignity of each. When we give moral education to our children, can we especially emphasize this line from an Ethical Culture Sunday School text: 'I am a member of the world community which depends on the cooperation of all people for peace and justice.'

We could, in general, align more consciously with the human rights advocates who use law, norms and standards as a guide for action. Above all, we can continue to educate ourselves and our visitors about human rights and justice issues. And I will ask here that each of us take individual action by joining the internet campaign *Every Human Has Rights*, launched to reaffirm and reclaim the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the eve of its sixtieth anniversary.<sup>6</sup>

The establishment of internationally agreed human rights standards and obligations, together with individuals around the world taking responsibility to act, is a powerful combination that fosters a more ethical globalization. As activist Ann Blyberg has written, 'the human rights struggle belongs to each and every person and is the responsibility of all of us'. Because the human rights struggle is also concerned with consensus-building, human rights work 'is one of moving a society to the point where there is an agreement that a particular practice or particular action is unacceptable because it violates human dignity'.

The Society for Ethical Culture, of course, has played exactly this role of highlighting affronts to human dignity throughout our history. The discussions that take place in our Society now through the Public Issues Committee, and the practice of protecting human dignity through the Social Service Board's efforts are illustrations of this.

In the book by Mary Ann Glendon that I referred to earlier, she cites the nightly prayer of Eleanor Roosevelt included in the book *Mother R*. It is so close to some of our

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<sup>6</sup> [www.everyhumanhasrights.org](http://www.everyhumanhasrights.org)

values and beliefs at Ethical Culture that I would like to close with it – with a *few small* amendments I have made:

*... [we have] restlessness in our hearts and [are] all seekers after that which we can never fully find... Draw us from base content and set our eyes on far-off goals. Keep us at tasks too hard for us... Deliver us from fretfulness and self-pitying; make us sure of the good we cannot see and of the hidden good in the world. Open our eyes to simple beauty all around us, and our hearts to the liveliness men hide from us because we do not try to understand them. Save us from ourselves and show us a vision of a world made new.*

Or to use a more mundane saying – what we might say to those who believe the challenges are too overwhelming, the costs too great, and the goals of ethical globalization too lofty to embrace - ‘The person who says it can’t be done shouldn’t interrupt those of us who are doing it.’

Thank you.

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR  
**ETHICAL CULTURE** 

A member of the American Ethical Union  
and the International Humanist & Ethical Union

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