

WORLD UNDERSTANDING MONTH  
(Speech to Rotary Club, Tanjung Bungah, Penang)  
1 February 1995  
By  
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Mr. President, Mr. President elect, Members of the Rotary Club of Tanjung Bungah, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is not the first time I am invited to speak to the Rotary Club. But this is the first time I am asked to speak on such a general subject as "World Understanding".

I told Mr. Tharuma that I was and am not at all qualified to speak on such a subject, as my training and my experience is confined to the narrow and technical field of law, with almost no international exposure, including to the kind of rhetoric that one hears at the United Nations General Assembly on similar topics! However, Mr. Tharuma, as usual, was very persuasive. I found it hard to say "no" to him. But, that does not mean that he would win every case before me, because sometimes, cases are won or lost in spite of the counsel. Of course, a good counsel does make a difference. At least he does not make it difficult for the Court to decide in favour of his client!

I have another limitation. My job does not allow me to make public statements on controversial issues, especially if it touches on politics. However, I assure you that you will not miss anything for that reason. Judges, if they are what they should be and continue so to be, would not make successful politicians. It is therefore quite sensible that they should not speak on matters that they are not good at.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was told that this is your World Understanding Month. This is also my and the Muslim's fasting month. Indeed today is the first day of the fasting month. One of the aims of fasting is to create a better understanding of fellow human beings who are less fortunate than ourselves. The theory is that if you yourself feel what hunger is, what thirst is, you would better understand the suffering of others. The fasting month ends with the giving of alms to the poor called zakat fitrah.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Perhaps, next year you should include fasting as one of the activities during your world understanding month. In particular you should get the leaders of the super-powers, the members of the Security Council and others like them to fast

for a month. Hopefully they would understand the plight of the hungry and the destitute all over the world better.

I asked myself the question whether at any point of time in human history there was a semblance (just a semblance) of world understanding and world peace. I am afraid my answer was “No.”.

We read in the Old Testament (forgive me if I am wrong as I wrote this speech from memory alone) as well as in the Quran (about which I am sure) that at a time when there were only two men in this world, who were brothers (being the sons of Adam), they fought. One was killed.

The history of the world is mainly a history of wars – from the conquests of Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan to the First and Second World Wars and to the Gulf War, to mention just a few.

Sometimes, I wonder why people like Alexander the Great or Genghis Khan, at a time when there was so much land and so few people, at a time when it would take months, if not years, to travel from one end of the empire to the other, would want to spend all their life-time on horsebacks fighting wars, and in the case of Alexander the Great, died at a very young age. On the other hand, perhaps, it is what Alexander did that made him “the Great” and it is what Genghis Khan did that made him known to us, hundreds of years later. But is it worth it especially considering the deaths and sufferings caused by them? I don’t know.

This region too, was not different. There were wars between Malacca and Acheh, Malacca and Majapahit, attacks by the Bugis, wars between and within the Malay States, not to forget the ever present threat by Siam, as it was known then, which facilitated the so-called British Intervention.

Wars had been fought for various and at times, unimaginable reasons. It could be power, colonisation, religion, woman, spice, opium, (as in the case of Great Britain and China), a football match (as between Honduras and El Salvador), communism, independence, democracy, oil, and in future, may be trees and ozone layer.

Wars don’t appear to solve anything, in the long run. The First World War begot the Second World War. The Second World War begot the Cold War and other wars including the Vietnam war.

As soon as one war is over, another is conceived, often with a former ally.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We tend to believe that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is the apex of all human civilisation, so far. Is it so? If we are only referring to the technological advancement, of course

the answer is “Yes”. If we are talking about the standard of living and quality of life, again we can safely say that the answer is “Yes” provided that you don’t live in Somalia. But can it be said that the human race of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is more humane, more civil, more caring and more benevolent?

The answer seems to be mixed. “Yes” they are now more caring and more concerned about sea-lions, sea-birds, whales, frogs and turtles. But “No” they don’t seem to care about the lives of Iraqis, Bosnians and others.

Now consider this illustration:

In the old days battle fields were defined and limited. Soldiers faced each other. Their swords would only kill one of the other of them. (Of course the victor would also resort to killing the civilians and burning towns and villages after the war is won.) Nowadays, with the so-called smart bombs, carpet bombing, missiles and chemical weapons, no distinction is made between soldiers and civilians, between men and women, adult and children. All perish.

Now consider this illustration:

When two bulls lock their horns to fight for the control of the herd they only go for each other. At the most, only both of them are injured and one of them dies. The cows and the calves are safe. The grazing ground is not damaged. The water hole is not polluted.

Who or what is more destructive, humans or animals? I shall leave the question to you to answer, if you think it is worth answering.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We live in a world which is full of contradictions and hypocrisies. One person may have a thousand dollar dinner, yet another has nothing at all to eat. One person may consume a few-hundred-dollar-a-bottle drink, yet another does not even have water to drink. In one country, the people die of starvation. Yet in another, staple food is destroyed in protest against low prices. Champions of human rights don’t seem to care about human lives – if they are not of their own people. The people (I say people not nation) who preach equality, democracy and human rights were the ones who were involved in slave trade, annihilation of the natives, creation of a master race and the practice of apartheid. Nations which oppose the cutting down of trees in tropical countries, themselves build nuclear reactors and produce biological weapons. People whose religion preaches love practise “ethnic cleansing”. Followers of the “Religion of Peace” are at war with one another. Capital punishment, even after a fair and protracted trial, is “uncivilised”. But, bombing and killing thousands of men, women and children is “heroic”. And so on.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fortunately you are half way through your dinner. Otherwise I might have spoilt your appetite. Anyway I don't want to spoil your appetite for the rest of the dinner. I shall now turn to the brighter side. It is said that, in every massacre, there is an escape. In a dark tunnel, there is a ray of light. Even under the worst situation there are some who care, some who try to reduce human sufferings. You, as a group, are one of them. Otherwise you would not have bothered to designate one month as the "World Understanding Month."

However, I realise your limitations. You can't change the world. But I don't think one should try to change the world. Some have tried, all were in vain. Marx, Lenin and Stalin tried to change the world. But, what was done was in seventy years at the cost of millions of lives, was undone in just a few years by Gurbachev. Pol Pot thought that he could make a paradise on earth by killing everybody who owns a motor-cycle and more and by making everybody a rice farmer. He only succeeded in ruining the economy and causing death to millions. Come to think of it, Pol Pot must have heard about how successful Malaysia had been with her rubber replanting scheme. So, he decided to adopt it and apply it to the people of Cambodia, not realising that one simply cannot replant human beings. The Vietnamese fought the Americans for decades. Now they are friends again. I wonder what those young soldiers, Vietnamese or Americans, died for.

So I suggest that we should take a different approach. We should not begin with the world. Instead, we should begin from the smallest unit i.e. ourselves. After all life on this planet earth, according to scientists began with a one-cell amoeba. We should search our own soul or conscience. We should ask ourselves first, whether in our relationship with people closest to us, we are considerate enough, whether we ever try to understand other people's feelings, whether we are considerate to our neighbours and to other road users when driving, or whether we are utterly mean, conceited and care only for our own interests. We should try to inculcate in our children some moral values, not just to teach them how to make money no matter how. Then we go on to ask ourselves whether as professionals or businessmen or whatever, we are ethical and honest in our relationship with our clients, trading partners and consumers. If we are vested with power, whether that power is exercised fairly and properly. If we are in a position to influence others, we should try to influence them to do the same and so on and so on. In other words, we begin from the smallest unit and expand it outwards as far as we can go. Hopefully, we might reach those in power and influence them to do the same. Whatever little contributions we can make, we make. We should also try to make others to do the same!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have said at the beginning of this speech that the world had never seen absolute understanding and peace. In my view, we should not dream of one. We should not be too optimistic that we can achieve it. I fear that, if we have such a dream and if we are too convinced that we can achieve it, we might make the same mistake made by Pol Pot. We end up causing more misery.

On the other hand, if we are more realistic in our hopes, more humane in our approach, even if we only manage to create an awareness in each of us and those around us and to make whatever little contribution we can towards a more understanding and peaceful home, neighbourhood, state, country, region and the world, that is actually one step towards the right direction. On the other hand, even if we don't succeed, at least, we don't make it worse.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure dinner is ready to be continued, Thank you very much.