

Video Message to the 50th Soka University Festival and the 36th Soka Women's College Swan Festival "Soka Glory Meeting"

Ela Gandhi

Thank you for conferring this honour on me to address such an august gathering of young people on their journey to take up their positions in the world.

But may I firstly congratulate you on the 50th anniversary of the founding of Soka University the 50th Soka University Student Festival. Indeed you have much to celebrate.

But as you young people step into the world outside we need to focus on some of the key issues facing us right now: the growing inequality, unemployment, exploitation, environmental degradation, intolerance, extremism, anger, violence and the race for weapons of mass destruction. These are but a few of the major issues that confront us today, but they also confronted Mahatma Gandhi (1869), Dr Nelson Mandela (1918), Dr Daisaku Ikeda (1928) and Dr Martin Luther King Jr (1929).

Each of them in their own lives and times embraced humanism as the key answer to these issues facing humanity.

But let me hasten to say that all is not doom and gloom. While glaring in our faces are the terrible ills of society, there are millions toiling away quietly in the various corners of the world applying principles of humanism and bringing about small but meaningful changes. Eknath Easwaran in the book Gandhi on the Power of One, quotes Gandhiji, "*As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world – that is the myth of the atomic age – as in being able to remake ourselves.*" My dear friend, Loren Braithwaite Kobosha, and the General Director of SGI South Africa tells me, "you are familiar with this process of "re-making ourselves" that Gandhiji spoke of – that you call this inner transformation "human revolution" or courageously breaking out of our small, confined state of life and encouraging

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others as we advance together.”

But maybe to explain this further and to see why this is necessary and what are the outcomes of re-making ourselves, let me explain, it means that if we begin to think differently, our feelings will change and we will be better able to control our emotions and if we are in control of our emotions our actions and reactions will be different and that in turn would elicit a different response from those around us. And so the world around us will change.

This will happen not only because we are viewing our environment “through new lenses” or “new thought processes” and emotions but also because the change within us will allow us to take actions in ways we wouldn't have previously thought of or felt we could be capable of.

But having received a well-rounded education at this University I dare say you are equipped with the necessary tools to deal with these issues. Education however does not end after you leave University. We all continue learning as we experience the world. Learning and change in our lives are continuous and lifelong.

I will share three basic tenets that I think are absolutely necessary for us to be able to attain our goal of a good wholesome life for all. 1. The ability and habit of exercising self-criticism 2. Shifting the focus from “I” to “us and the universe” and 3. The practice of self-control.

In your work you would have learned that for any plan to be successful it has to be constantly evaluated and, based on the findings, new plans have to be implemented. Similarly in life we need to constantly exercise self-criticism and evaluation of ourselves so that we can make the necessary adjustments and changes within ourselves. Without that we stagnate. We all make mistakes but it takes determination, courage and faith to pocket the embarrassment, acknowledge the mistake, and set new goals. This is a lesson that no one can teach us. It is a lesson we learn through our own self management. Gandhiji wrote in explaining his interpretation of the Gita, “Spiritual self education can be attained through contemplation humility and selflessness.... Yogic exercise of breathing helps to control the mind, channelling it to devotion. We should perform actions with a spirit of detachment and devotion.” By engaging in these practices, which I am sure you have learnt and practice through your personal beliefs, you will be able to be self-critical and be able to change once you recognise your mistake.

Another very important point that I would like to place on the table today is that we see the

turmoil in the world and in my view at the core of the turmoil is self-centredness. We neglect some of the major issues because we choose an easier way of living without having to worry about the effects of our action on other people, on our environment or on animals. There would be such a great impact on the world if all of us begin to shift the focus from “I” to “us and our universe.” Distance is no longer an issue, modern technology has brought us all closer. Perhaps in Gandhiji’s time he could focus on India as a continent, but today we need to focus on the sun and the stars and the air and our water and a million other things around us, not least the corona virus and others that may still arise and affect our very existence on this planet. How are our actions affecting the lives of other people, of the environment and the world in general, such as burning down the rainforests far away in Brazil. These are issues that we all need to grapple with urgently, but the interest in these issues arise when we are able to link our actions to the effect they have on others and the world.

The final point I would like to make is that in our fast world where we are rushing around where everything is urgent, where time is translated into money, people’s minds and bodies are affected. Unless we make our own adjustments to step out of this rushing humanity, we can be consumed into this system which in itself is maiming us, dehumanising us and killing us.

I have found through my own experience that if we do not find ways to step out, we become prone to irritation, to anger, to envy, to impatience and at times to arrogance. This leads us into situations of conflict and strife and it can have the effect of swallowing us up in this whirlpool.

When we learn to step out and exert self-control on these negative feelings, then we find a door to happiness, contentment, self-satisfaction and pride or self-respect simply because we have now mastered the ability not to react rashly and are able to control our emotions and actions. With such a state it is easier to achieve peace.

We need to stop building walls. More interaction and discussion of even the most difficult situations can bring about peace.

I mention this because it is important in our world today where communities are falling apart because of a growing mindset that is based on differences based on gender, race, caste, class, and religion just to mention a few. We build walls and have no idea of the people on the other side so we have the syndrome which is known as “us and them.” Martin Luther King Jr wrote in his book: Where do we go from here Chaos or Community? ...

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The "tide in the affairs of men" does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, "Too late" (But) we still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. This may well be mankind's last chance to choose between chaos and community." These words were written in 1968. Today 52 years later these words still continue to ring true.

The choice as well as the need to act is now in your hands. As academics you are armed with knowledge and you can use the knowledge to build society. You are the future leaders of this country and the world.

We must adhere to our own humanistic philosophy, in South Africa we refer to it as *Ubuntu* which means without you I am nothing or the interconnectedness of humanity and the need for humanism, caring for each other. This institution, I believe is based on this philosophy. Let not the glare of the wealth outside, blind you and lead you away from this philosophy.

In conclusion, I want to quote from a profound message touching on the issues of various conflicts around the world, the major problem of climate change and human survival and the hazards of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In this message sent by Dr Ikeda in celebration of your anniversaries he wrote, "When we consider global issues, our first and foremost focus must be on the threats presented to the lives, livelihoods and dignity of individual human beings...." He goes on to say, "The foundation of Makiguchi's thinking was an awareness that this world is, more than anything, the site of shared living...."

Dr Ikeda went on to convey, "At that conference, at which the SGI was established on January 26, 1975, I wrote in the guest book under the column for country of origin, "The World"."

What an inspiration!

Thank you.