

## **Future Positive: Annual Conference, Engineers Without Borders, Canada.**

Thanks to Parker and the rest of the organizing team, delighted to be here, impressed with the progress you have made and your openness to self-criticism. And that's the spirit in which I want to talk with you today.

Now, how many times have you watched "Lord of the Rings", and what's your favorite scene in the movie? Mine comes at the end of the battle for Helm's Deep, in the second film of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*. Down the mountainside comes the white wizard Gandalf (or maybe he was beige – the Beige wizard doesn't sound quite the same does it?), sweeping away the army of evil orcs in a breathtaking display of righteous and unambiguously successful military intervention.

Except, of course, this is a fantasy. In reality, there are no unambiguously righteous or successful interventions in life, military or otherwise. You know that, I certainly know it after 25 years at the sharp end of the foreign aid business. Yet the myth of the savior, casting out darkness with one sweep of his mighty sword, remains an immensely powerful leitmotif in our imaginations, however sophisticated our claims to the contrary.

In its most virulent form, it is driving Western attempts to remake the Middle East, and in other less-virulent varieties it continues to pollute our attempts to practice international cooperation, reform the foreign aid business, create more democratic forms of global governance, build civil societies worthy of the name, or even turn our personal and professional relationships into healthier and more democratic encounters.

Of course this doesn't apply to you nor I, we are highly-evolved beings in the international arena aren't we, who have passed beyond all such limitations. I'm joking of course, since in reality Gandalf's ghost continues to haunt us, albeit often at the subconscious level. The easy answer, the universal formula for success, the magic bullet for development, the quick result, the belief that we know best, the stereotyping of others as backward instead of different - all these are symptoms of a deeper malaise that we have to recognize and root out if we truly want to be helpful to each-other in our common struggles for peace and social justice.

When one looks for reasons to explain the failure of international negotiations, foreign aid, technical assistance, humanitarian relief or public education, it is often these basic, elemental attitudes and interests that are ultimately responsible, which is why – as Robert Chambers reminds us – the struggle for global justice and equality can't be separated from the personal journey towards self-knowledge and inner transformation that all of us must undergo.

"Burying Gandalf's ghost" – which means replacing, re-inventing, rebuilding, and re-engineering large parts of the system we have created since 1945 – may strike you as a pessimistic message in a conference like this. But I want to make the case that there are much better and more exciting alternatives within our grasp, and that the work you are doing to promote them is pioneering a historic shift from what I'm going to call the "international development model" to "global civil society", for want of a better phrase – from an international system that interferes too much in the detail of other people's lives

but not enough when it really matters – think about the web of conditions that is routinely spun around local action and autonomy by World Bank loans, contrasted with the West’s reluctance to act against genocide in Rwanda or Darfur - to a new system that welcomes diversity and *encourages* disagreement, while standing firm against the abuse of fundamental rights and freedoms through new forms of collective action.

The way to realize this vision is not through a new model – any model - that is exported across the globe, but rather through a shared effort to create the conditions in which people can find their own ways forward, without imposing unfair costs on anyone else. So in your work, be a servant of Global Civil Society, not an agent of foreign aid.

You’ll probably remember that this was very much the tenor of the debate prior to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but instead of re-energizing a commitment to multilateralism as had been hoped, the attacks turned US policy towards the doctrine of pre-emptive force. Now though, the wheel is turning again as a result of the problems encountered by US unilateralism in Iraq and elsewhere, and that historic conversation is being revived with fresh energy. This is one of the unforeseen consequences of the War on Terror. “Never before in the history of the world”, says Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, “has there been a global, visible, public, open dialogue and conversation about the legitimacy of war,” and more broadly, about how best to support each other in and across societies in our endeavors to lead more fulfilling lives.

In contrast to the traditional international development or foreign aid paradigm, the conversation we need to have is less about how to solve poverty “over there” by providing more mosquito nets, finding a cure for HIV/Aids, or cranking up the microfinance machine, though these things are obviously important, and more about how we can work together to re-fashion all our societies in the image of truth, beauty and justice. There is something desperately self-limiting about reducing the dreams of the good society to a discussion of foreign aid. Ultimately, Global Civil Society implies a journey of self-discovery as we explore and commit ourselves to the radically-different roles and relationships this future world demands.

Let me make it absolutely clear (since this is a criticism commonly made by those who – contrary to what I’m going to argue - believe that solutions to world poverty are achievable if only we have enough money to spend on them – what I diagnose as “MDG-fever”) that I am not recommending inertia, isolationism, complacency or any kind of defeatism in the face of the outrageous realities of poverty and oppression in the contemporary world. Instead, I’m recommending an equally positive, practical and energetic, but different philosophy to guide our endeavors.

This philosophy is what the Brazilians call “critical friendship”, and what I define as “the loving but forceful encounters between equals who journey together towards the land of the true and the beautiful” on the last pages of “Future Positive. “The loving but forceful encounters between equals who journey together towards the land of the true and the beautiful.”

This is not, for me simply a moral or ethical statement, though at heart it is precisely that, and I’ll talk about this in more detail towards the end of my remarks, but a conclusion born of long, hard empirical experience, and an exhaustive analysis of what works in international development, and what does not. As engineers, I know that is particularly important for you.

My grandfather was an engineer, present when Samuel Cody landed his biplane in a field in Hampshire in the 1920s I think, and eventually rising to become the Chief Experimental Officer for the Royal Air Force in the UK, where I come from. As a young boy, he made me an invention for each of my birthdays between the ages of six and twelve, and his garden shed held that magical aura and smell of the workshop, the feeling that anything was possible so long as you had a lathe, some plaster of Paris, glue and sufficient imagination.

So I have a particular fondness for engineers even though I'm not practical enough to be one myself. I think of you as solidly-grounded pragmatists who don't suffer fools gladly and approach every problem as an opportunity to invent a new set of answers – which, it turns out, is a pretty good basis for success in the field we are talking about today.

So let's take a quick look at what the philosophy of critical friendship could mean in practice when applied to the work we do.

The first part of my definition emphasizes the importance of “forceful encounters between equals” as the best foundation for international cooperation. Why? Because that's the only basis for successful, democratic negotiations about problems and solutions, and in the long term, such negotiations are the only way of securing agreements that will hold about human rights, development strategies, trade policy, the conditions for military intervention, and so on.

Of course, we are very far from such equal and democratic negotiations in the current operation of the World Trade Organization, the IMF, US policy in Iraq, or even a simple relief or development project on the ground somewhere in Africa or Asia, but when you think about it, even in your own personal dealings and relationships, you can't force or bribe other people to change their behavior on any sustainable basis. You can only support them to reach their own conclusions, learn from their mistakes, and pursue their journeys with a little more knowledge, confidence, capacity and information. And that's enough.

The best way to be helpful is to put your own house in order, create a climate in which people can make better choices for themselves, and be ready to respond quickly and effectively if they ask you for support. So if Malaysia wants to impose controls on the flow of capital into and out of the country, let them do it, even if it violates IMF orthodoxy. If it takes longer than the normal two or three-year project cycle to achieve any progress, stick with it despite the pressure for quick results that will come your way from Parliament or Congress. And if rights and democracy are understood and expressed in different ways from one culture to another, let the struggle unfold organically instead of passing easy judgments on the rights and wrongs of others, based on your own values and experiences.

These are exactly the conditions that underlay success in societies that have made good progress on poverty, rights and political participation since 1945 in East Asia and elsewhere, a story that is recounted in detail in the book. Countries like South Korea, Chile and Botswana invested broadly in the capacities of their citizens, built stronger connections between different institutions (public, private and non-profit) that enabled society to move in a particular direction over time, and exploited their room-to-

maneuver in the international system so they could both defend their interests and take advantage of the opportunities provided by the emerging global economy. The same patterns reappear in successful development projects and organizations.

This doesn't mean turning a blind eye to gross injustices or the need for urgent action in humanitarian emergencies. Such situations require prompt and concrete intervention, not a sociology lesson or a treatise about participation, but they also require humility and careful preparation to guard against hubris, build legitimacy, and prepare the way to cope with the unanticipated consequences of our good intentions. Iraq today is a prime illustration of what can happen when these simple imperatives are ignored.

Overall, remember what I call "the 3 Cs" of good development practice – consistency, continuity and coherence. Consistency creates strong incentives for change because your actions are clear, transparent and carry predictable consequences. Continuity implies the commitment to work together over the long term, despite the disagreements that are bound to arise along the way. And coherence means a unified framework for decision-making on all the things that influence a problem, instead of, for example, increasing foreign aid while allowing trillions of dollars to leak out of the international system in corporate tax evasion. Servants of Global Civil Society, not agents of foreign aid. So far so good, but what is it that makes possible such different forms of behavior in our efforts to support each-other's attempts to live more fulfilling lives? What is it that enables us to hand over control, share power, and live a life that is consistent with our principles? What is it that encourages those in power to rise above national, political, personal or commercial interests and take up the mantle of critical friendship? I think what is missing is love, to go back to the other part of my definition of critical friendship. That's right L-O-V-E. It's difficult and embarrassing to talk about love in public, isn't it, yet it's one of the most important things we need to do if we are to find lasting solutions to the problems of poverty and oppression.

I'm not talking about romantic love, or love in the infantile sense of being made happy (though I admit that's attractive!), but what Martin Luther King called "the love that does justice", a radical equality consciousness that breaks down all distance and hierarchy. The wonderfully-named Institute for Research on Unlimited Love at Case Western University in Cleveland (which is a real place, I'm not making it up) defines love as follows: "to affectively affirm as well as unselfishly delight in the well being of others, and to engage in acts of care and service on their behalf, without exception, in an enduring and constant way."

This is a love that respects the necessary self-empowerment of others, eschewing paternalism and romanticism for relationships of truth and authenticity, even where they move through phases of conflict and disagreement, as all do.

This is a love that encourages us to live up to our social obligations as well our individual moral values, connect our interior life worlds to public spaces, encourage collective judgments and create open networks of self-reflective and critical communication. This love is active, not passive, explicitly considering the effects of oppressive and exploitative systems and structures on the welfare of others, and not just focused on the immediate circle of family and friends – a deep and abiding commitment to the liberation of all.

Critical friendship is nothing more, and nothing less, than a deep and abiding commitment to the marriage of love and reason, the two things that make possible a principled negotiation of our differences through an honest, open and democratic conversation about the rules, standards, trade-offs and compromises that operate in the

international arena. If international cooperation could be approached in that way, we would much, much closer to a successful resolution of our problems. Servants of Global Civil Society, not agents of foreign aid.

I don't underestimate the difficulty of acting out of love and reason given the realities of the world we live in. Being a critical friend - in your relationships with each-other, in your families, in the organizations you work for, the projects you create, and the debates you engage in, is never easy. It takes courage, imagination, patience and great self-knowledge. This is not a journey for the faint-hearted. It lasts a lifetime, and at the end you may feel you have achieved little of any consequence. My advice is don't worry, do what you can, as effectively as you can, and leave the rest to others. Any mindful action undertaken in the spirit of love will help the transformative process along. As Martin Luther King once said, "our lives end the moment we think that there is nothing left to change."

Something tells me, at least with this group gathered together here in Ottawa, that King would not be worried. You've already shown your commitment to the love that does justice through your involvement with this wonderful organization, Engineers Without Borders. I'm very confident that you will continue to show it as your participation deepens.

And the next time you watch Lord of the Rings, take a close look at the behavior of the elves, who appear to bolster the sagging army of humans as the Orcs approach the gates of the Helms Deep fortress. They arrive when you need them, leave when you ask them to, provide the help you actually want rather than the help they think you ought to have, behave consistently across the ages, and value their own culture while declining to impose it on others. *And* they have the long blond hair and those lovely pointy ears.

That's all from me. Thanks for listening. I wish you well in your deliberations, great success in your endeavors, and thank you very much.

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