



Thoughts from Linda:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 21st Century

A Living Document in a Changing World

A Report by the Global Citizenship Commission
Chaired by Gordon Brown

2016

Is there a 'common conscience' for humanity?

December 10th, 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of what has been called "a universal code of human dignity" on the planet: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was signed by the countries represented in the United Nations following the end of WWII. The UDHR is a small booklet comprised of 30 Articles and was reviewed on this bookshelf as our very first book in March of 2020, reflecting our own organizational and personal commitment to the value of human dignity and all it implies.

The original Declaration is one of the most profound and inspiring documents I have ever read. It was approved by 48 members of the United Nations, with 8 communist countries abstaining and 2 others that failed to either vote or abstain. The Declaration has been translated into 350 languages and is the best-known and most often cited human rights document on earth.

The UDHR was the output of a UNESCO chartered Commission that worked from 1946 to 1948, with the official authorization to "formulate a preliminary draft international bill of human rights." This group evolved into a more formal Commission quickly which was comprised of 18 members from various political, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Thanks to Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of former President Franklin Roosevelt, who chaired the Commission, it achieved its original purpose, gaining adoption after immense scrutiny by all nations. In fact, the General Assembly reviewed the document with over 50 of the Member States voting over 1,400 times on practically every clause and every word of the text. It was approved by Resolution 217 A (III) on December 10, 1948, in a truly historic moment.

The United Nations at the time called on all Member States “to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read, and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories.”

The UDHR in the 21st Century, edited by Gordon Brown, brings the original UDHR into modern times by affirming this original document. It also seeks further recognition and respect for human rights for all citizens of the world in our interconnected age, 75 years after WWII.

The intention of the book was not to rewrite the UDHR but rather to share an analytical commentary reflective of the changed circumstances on the planet since 1948 and progress in the moral thought since those first days of the Declaration. As the book notes, “the report further observes that individuals, states, and other entities each and all have a common duty to ensure recognition of human rights and accept responsibility to secure them.”

It is interesting to remember the context surrounding the original Declaration prior to exploring this book. As Rick Halperin, Director of the SMU Human Rights Program, reminds us: “In 1945, most countries were governed by the common belief that there was a hierarchy of privileged groups in each society. America was still a brutally racist society, dominated by the legal system of ‘separate but equal’ as expressed by the US Supreme Court in its notorious 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision. It was a period with an active commitment to eugenics, in which approximately 70,000 Americans between 1907 and 1977--overwhelmingly people of color--were legally sterilized without their knowledge or consent. More than 120,000 Japanese Americans had been interned in camps between 1942 and 1945. It was an era in which both the American medical and legal professions played leading roles in efforts designed to degrade, debase, humiliate, punish, or injure certain groups, all in the name of the law.”

Of course, the atrocities committed by the Nazis in WWII were horrific, as were those of other countries. The Nuremberg Trials were revealing unbelievable facts to the whole world. The Holocaust claimed the lives of 17 million people, most of whom were civilians, including 6 million who were Jewish. Two atomic bombs had been dropped late in the war on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. The war had claimed 70 million lives in total.

The original Declaration was born into this global context and aimed to serve three key purposes: 1) to provide a set of general human rights principles, 2) to codify those principles into law, and 3) to provide a practical means of implementation. The circumstances that existed following WWII prevented the accomplishment of all three of these objectives, but the first task was completed.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided, as Gordon Brown reminds us, “a common conscience for humanity and a beacon of hope. It is also a call for action, setting a high standard by which we judge the width of our generosity, the depth of our compassion, and the breadth of our humanity. It sends forth a message that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and that no evil can last forever.”

Gordon Brown, former U.K. Chancellor of the Exchequer (1997-2007) and Prime Minister (2007-2010), joined John Sexton, President of New York University, in The Global Citizenship Commission (GCC) to focus on just how the Declaration is understood for those born after 1948 and thus into a world where these rights are known. This group joined with a United Nations effort chartered by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to form the team that brought forward this book. The working group is a ‘who’s who’ of leading thinkers, international lawyers, and others of global repute. The Appendices offer rich biographies of all those involved in this report.

As Brown notes, it was their concentrated effort in this work to “reflect the (belief and admonition of Eleanor Roosevelt) that ... these ideals carry no weight unless the people know them, unless the people understand them unless the people demand that they be lived.”

The book is divided into seven sections: *The Long and Influential Life of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Evolving Understanding of Rights; Limitations and Derogations; Social and Economic Rights; Responsibility for Human Rights; Implementation of Human Rights and Human Rights; and A Global Ethic.*

This book contains the complete report of the Commission. Its first consideration was to explore just how our understanding of human rights has evolved since 1948. The report then moves to a very interesting and valuable set of chapters that identify specific rights requiring more emphasis than they received in the original work, such as the rights of women, children, and the disabled. And, in a world where 108 million people have been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or other events that seriously disturb the public order, the rights of migrants and

persons who are 'stateless' once again, just as was true in the upheavals following the Second World War, are a matter of vital importance.

The report goes on to examine the justification, if any exists, for the derogations of rights, how we combine civil and political rights with social and economic ones, and who must ultimately take responsibility for upholding the UDHR as a global ethic--a covenant. In many ways, he notes, this is the unfinished work of Eleanor Roosevelt's Commission.

Certainly, any rational observer would note that this picture of our world working to protect human rights does not much resemble the planet we live in as of 2023.

As Gordon Brown notes in his very compelling Introduction, "We write of course from a comfortable vantage point--from a promontory. Wherever we direct our gaze, we are bound to find broken refugees, oppressed children, and enslaved women. We see them and, in turn hope they see us and demand action. I do not expect our report to be, like the Declaration itself, timeless. But I do hope it will be timely, holding high once again the challenge posed to each successive generation--to do better and achieve more."

The Commission is insistent that rights imply responsibilities.

He continues, "In securing certain rights and seeking to enshrine others, we are constantly reminded of both how far the world has come and how much farther we must go. For we must never forget that the global condition of human rights--civil, political, social, and economic--is the yardstick with which we measure humanity's progress."

My wish for the new year is that the original Universal Declaration and this updated Report for the 21st Century become required reading in our schools. Our civilized society depends on shared values at the deepest level, and together, these two living documents give us the path and show us a way.

I highly recommend you read both.