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“Confronting the Challenge of Climate Change and Building Sustainable Communities”

Keynote Speech
by
Ambassador Robert F. Van Lierop
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Good afternoon. I thank you for inviting me to join you today to share a few of my thoughts, experiences, and hopes with you. It is an honor for me to be here with you.

As a youngster, I was always intrigued by two courses of study... history and geography. I am not sure why. History always captured my imagination. I would sometimes imagine the visual happenings of certain historical events and relive those events in my mind. So too with geography. I would often try to imagine the physical and cultural connections between different lands and peoples. Thus, every school day, or on visits to the public library, I was filled with great anticipation. I would draw parallels with events taking place as I was growing up with events I read of as I studied history, and geography. I became captivated and enthralled by what I read, heard, and learned. Knowledge of our past, and of our differences, and similarities, in various geographic locations (along with baseball) began to consume me and became passions that would remain with me throughout my youth, and well into my adulthood. It gradually dawned on me that in every corner of the globe each generation produces its own prophets and advocates for justice, equality, and the progress of humanity.

Such a prophet might be a man named Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, or Ghandi; a man named Frederick Douglas, Nat Turner, John Brown, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Nelson Mandela;; a woman named Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Fannie Lou Hamer, or Mother Theresa, or even three young martyrs named Schwerner, Cheney, and Goodman. Such a prophet might even be an artist named Prince, Nina Simone, Miriam Makeba, or Joan Baez. Occasionally, such a prophet, or advocate for justice is well known and highly regarded for other reasons, which makes the commitment to the betterment of the human species a little bit of a surprise to those who might not have known of that individual's strong moral principles, which helped to define him, or her. It is also important to remember that not every prophet is well known to others. Many prophesize anonymously, without reward or recognition.

Henry David Thoreau was a well known American humanist, philosopher, writer, and naturalist. What is less well known is that he was also an activist who shortly before the outbreak of the American Civil War was imprisoned for his refusal to pay taxes to a government that legally sanctioned the enslavement of his fellow human beings.

While in prison, he was visited by his close friend, fellow writer, and abolitionist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who upon seeing Thoreau on the other side of the bars in the prison exclaimed in a distraught manner, "Henry David, what are you doing in there?" Whereupon, Thoreau peered out at his friend from the behind the bars, and calmly replied in a dignified manner, "Ralph Waldo, what are you doing out there?" So spoke an abolitionist whose message on civil disobedience came to inspire generations of activists throughout the struggle for civil and human rights in the United States, and other parts of the world. Today, the world faces as great a threat to its survival as it has ever faced, certainly within our lifetimes. All of you in this room today are prophets without ever thinking of yourselves in that manner. Prophets do not always receive cheers, or even thanks from those they encounter, particularly those who wield political or economic power, those who for their own reasons do not care for the message of the prophecy. Your work for the UNA, or for Sustainable Westchester may from time to time be ignored, disregarded, or even criticized as being irrelevant, misguided, or even just plain wrong. Nonetheless, you continue your task of educating, and persuading. Eventually, you may even

have to agitate, in a very positive manner, for the benefit of our broader humanity. In the long journey that is the existence of life on this planet earth, life and civilization as we now know them have faced and overcome many obstacles. We humans, as a species, are predators. At different times in the epoch journey of what we now term civilization, we were challenged by other predators for our place on this planet. We were subsequently challenged by horrific wars fought by human beings in every corner of the globe. We were challenged by plagues, pestilence, infectious diseases, our own ignorance, bigotry, and lack of tolerance for our diversity and our fellow humans. Feudalism, slavery, and gender inequality are challenges that have receded somewhat, but not yet been completely eradicated. Indeed, some misguided individuals boast of their prowess as human traffickers, and of forcing women and young girls to be their sex slaves while professing to be loyal followers of the God they claim to believe in.

No God I know of, or could ever imagine, would ever welcome, or condone, such behavior. In one way or another, the United Nations is seized of all of these issues, and their consequences on life all over the globe. Today, however, nothing poses as large a threat to life...all life...on this planet as do the adverse consequences of human induced climate change.

I am not a scientist, nor am I a politician. I do, however, like to think that I possess at least a small degree of common sense. I trust science, and the wisdom of those who know more than I do. I know that life on this planet, all life, has many mysteries and exists in the delicate balance between many factors hanging together by a series of very thin interconnected threads.

Some humans like to believe that we control the earth and our future on it. Every day, however, nature mocks our vanity and shows its power in different ways. What we term "natural disasters" are disasters because we often tempt nature with human settlements, and economic activity, in close proximity to areas that are prone to experience events we can neither control, predict with precise certainty, or escape. We seem not to be students of history or geography. Thus, the lessons we should have learned from the demise of earlier civilizations are too frequently ignored by those who should know better. Science is ignored by too many of those who occupy positions of leadership. Common sense is ignored by them, claiming that climate science is a hoax aimed at destroying jobs in the fossil fuel industry. They often appear to be competing to see who can be the most shortsighted. The fact is that the ultimate costs of ignoring climate science will far exceed the costs of addressing the issue now. Small island and low lying coastal states in the developing world are the most immediately vulnerable. They are experiencing many of the adverse consequences of human induced climate change right now, as are most other countries, including some of the world's largest and most industrialized countries.

All one need do is look at the ice caps of the Himalayas, the Andes, the Alps, and other fresh water generating mountain ranges, or look at Antarctica, and the Arctic Circle to see clear signs of what is already occurring. With life on this planet being held together by an interconnected thread, it does not take much imagination to visualize what could happen in the wake of one huge climate catastrophe that triggers a chain reaction of one event after another as the planet spirals into the great unknown.

Who, or what can reverse, or at least stabilize this condition? Is it even possible to do so? Who knows? We must try, however. We can not give up hope. This is where the United Nations is not

only the best hope, but really the world's only hope! The adverse consequences of human induced climate change respect no borders or boundaries, no religion, no race or gender, and no class distinctions.

Individual wealth will not buy lasting protection when droughts, food shortages, and catastrophic weather events become everyday occurrences. Every nation, every territory, every village and hamlet will be affected. This is why we must all cooperate to save the planet, and we can only do so through acting collectively within the framework of the United Nations, with the effective leadership of the United States, China, Russia, and other large countries whose carbon emissions have been fueling the problem since the dawn of the industrial revolution. This is where you, the prophets in this room come in. The fact remains that the doubters and deniers, of climate science have succeeded in delaying the search for effective ways for the world to respond and protect itself. Is it too late for us to do what must be done? Possibly. Who knows? I happen to believe that most existing climate models tend to be somewhat conservative. Disaster may actually be closer than we think. Nonetheless, we must exert every possible effort to avert what could occur, and we must try harder than we have up to now.

The Paris Agreement signed with great hope and fanfare at the United Nations by 175 nations in the last ten days is a step in the right direction, but many of the most respected experts in the field feel it will not be nearly enough. Thus, while celebrating the progress we have made, we must also push harder for more, and for better results. It is incumbent on us, all of us to join hands and advocate for stronger measures to address the threat. The sponsors of this meeting, the young participants in the Model U.N., are all making common cause with others throughout the world who share your concerns, your values, and your hopes, if not your exact physical circumstances and social conditions. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development lays out a road map for us, and future generations to follow. It acknowledges that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "...is the primary international intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change." The 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda are the results of very extensive and painstaking negotiations. Those goals are clear, comprehensive, and the result of carefully conceived and constructed compromise. There were no individual winners or losers. Only time, and our collective will, can determine whether future generations will be the ultimate winners. The achievement of these goals will leave mankind, and our planet with better prospects for the future than exist at the moment.

All of you have done, and are still doing very important work on subjects directly related to many of the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda. In doing so you are in lock step with the many NGOs, academic institutions, religious institutions, private enterprises, labor organizations, state and local representatives, and others who attend the negotiations and other meetings at which climate change responses are discussed and formulated. The American Bar Association has a Task Force on Sustainable Development. The New York City Bar Association has a Task Force on the Legal Aspects of Adaptation to Climate Change. Both have shared their insight and perspectives with the United Nations and public officials in the United States. Both will soon be planning further activities that you may wish to participate in. When the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was being negotiated, the conventional wisdom was that no international agreement had ever been negotiated and approved within a timeframe as short as that we faced

before going to Rio for the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development. That same conventional wisdom also insisted that smaller countries were not critical "players" in negotiating major international agreements. That same conventional wisdom also maintained that because the subject matter concerned how all things mankind produced and consumed, would be produced and consumed in the future, it might be virtually improbable, if not impossible to attain the required consensus needed to mark progress.

As it turned out, conventional wisdom was not as "wise" as some assumed it was. In a very similar vein all of you have redefined conventional wisdom in your work, and I think it likely you will continue to do so.

I salute all of you, and wish you well as we march forward on behalf of our common humanity.
Peace!