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Hope and Human Rights: Empathy in the Age of Rage

Payam Akhavan PhD
Human Rights Chair and Senior Fellow
Massey College, University of Toronto

Abstract

Dr. Payam Akhavan, a Keynote speaker, shared his storied life journey of the risk confronting both our shared humanity and the diversity of our community living in harmony amid the onslaught of an age of rage - a rage that moves us in the direction of despair. However, he does not give in to despair. He concludes his story with an inspiring and hopeful verse from a Persian poet Hafiz: "*Even After All this time, The Sun never says to the Earth, "You Owe Me." Look What Happens With a Love like That. It lights the whole sky."*

Honourable Lieutenant-Governor, distinguished guests, chers collègues, chers amis: bonjour et merci de m'avoir invité. C'est un grand honneur de partager avec vous aujourd'hui quelques réflexions sur la promotion de l'espoir dans un monde divisé. It is a great honour to share some reflections on fostering hope in a divided world.

I am especially pleased to address you at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. It is a remarkable monument to our faith in human dignity; a faith that is at the core of our Canadian identity. We, who call ourselves Canadian, are both Indigenous and immigrants, Anglophone and Francophone, from every conceivable colour and creed in the world. We share a multicultural heritage, a conception of belonging founded on human dignity, that transcends the divisive ideologies that have wreaked such havoc throughout history. Yet today, that vision of a diverse community living in harmony, that vision of a shared humanity, is facing the onslaught of an age of rage. Whether it is antagonism in our local communities, or the rise of hateful populism in national politics, or the horrors of war and atrocities on the global stage, there is a prevalent sense of despair that humankind is

moving in the wrong direction. In an earlier time, we might have taken the theme of hope and human rights for granted, a feel-good progressive platitude. But now, this gathering assumes a much greater importance, as we gaze into a turbulent horizon, pondering an uncertain future.

I had the privilege of visiting the Museum not long after it opened its doors in 2014. The first time I had visited Winnipeg however was some thirty years earlier, in the winter of 1984. I was an itinerant teenager, en route to Nunavut, traveling from Toronto to visit a remote place called Baker Lake, or Qamani'tuaq in Inuktitut. It was a long and memorable flight across the vast Arctic tundra. Upon arriving, I realized that the freezing temperatures in Winnipeg had in fact been quite reasonable. I asked an Inuit resident of the hamlet how cold it was, and he responded that: "it doesn't matter." I can only imagine what he must have thought about an ignorant *kabloona* from the south asking such a stupid question.

The Inuit culture was like nothing I had experienced before. It wasn't difficult to sense the profound spirituality that was shaped by the immensity of the land, stretching as far as the eye could see, enveloped in the constant darkness of the winter night. The magical glow of the aurora borealis, in enchanting shades of green and purple, a cosmic curtain dancing mysteriously in the heavens above, was a surreal spectacle made all the more dream-like by the scattering of brilliant stars glittering from distant galaxies. That purposeful silence was full of meaning, a pervasive message that despite our delusional self-importance, we are but an insignificant speck in an infinite universe.

The beauty of the moment though came with the stark realization that at minus 50°C, the idea of freezing to death was not metaphorical. The biting wind summoned all to prostrate themselves before the brutal laws of nature that spared no one. It was difficult to understand how the Inuit had survived in this climate from time immemorial. Such resilience was unfathomable. The intuitive way in which they communicated too was striking, prolonged silence punctuated by very few but meaningful words. This ancient wisdom of harmony with the universe stood in sharp contrast to the constant noise of the big city, with empty chatter and endless entertainment, and a corrosive consumerism portrayed as the pursuit of happiness.

As much as I approached this new culture with reverence and curiosity, there was also a palpable grief amongst the people that I encountered. The youth my age talked of

substance abuse, self-harm and suicide. These were conversations that I could not fully appreciate at the time. I met a young woman wearing a traditional parka. Her adorable toddler was peering out with big brown eyes from the comfortable pouch on her mother's back where she was ensconced. There were no words exchanged for a while. Then suddenly, without any introduction, she shared the story of her sister who went south and never returned, her whereabouts still unknown. A long silence followed. Like most Canadians, I had yet to learn about the plight of murdered and missing Indigenous women, or the legacy of colonialism and the residential schools, or the inter-generational trauma behind self-harm and substance abuse.

There was an endearing authenticity among those I befriended, but also an immense need for healing. Immersed in a culture that was foreign to me, I had come upon a remarkable combination of spirituality and suffering, as I struggled with my own sorrow. Our experiences were so radically different, but we could somehow connect in profound ways across our vast cultural differences. We were learning the language of empathy, the mother tongue of human beings.

In 1983, the year before visiting Nunavut, my life had suddenly changed course because of events in Iran, the land of my birth. I had become a Canadian citizen in 1980, a year after the revolution that established the so-called Islamic Republic of Iran. When we first arrived in Toronto, I didn't quite understand the meaning of persecution and exile. I lived in a world of childhood innocence. My parents sheltered me from the dark clouds that were gathering, presaging the violent storm that would destroy so many lives.

At first, I was terribly home-sick, longing for the embrace of friends and family that filled my life with so much love and warmth. One of the best memories I had was the beautiful orchard where we would spend the weekends. It was a bucolic paradise, an escape from the unbearable stress of life in Tehran, with its incessant noise, pollution, and traffic. In the pre-social media dark ages, these social gatherings were instrumental in acquiring information and learning from others. When Bruce Lee's "Enter the Dragon" first appeared in the cinema, it was up to the older cousins to teach the latest Kung Fu techniques to the younger cousins who weren't allowed to watch the film. Our exhausted parents wanted nothing more than reposing beneath the cool shade of mulberry trees, with the soothing sounds of the limpid stream. Instead, they would be screaming at

us to stop experimenting on each other with leaping tiger kicks, warning us to no avail that somebody is going to get hurt.

Iran was now a world away. Fresh experiences supplanted distant memories. As one of two brown children in the fourth grade, accused by the schoolyard bullies of hostage-taking and suicide-bombing, my priority was to gain acceptance in my new home. This was not yet the multicultural society that we know today. My efforts to become a Canadian patriot were genuine though not without difficulties. There was the one time that I confused the theme from Hockey Night in Canada with the national anthem. In fact, much of what I initially learned was from television. Having watched American movies dubbed in Persian, I was surprised to see John Wayne speaking fluent English. Armed with the remote control, I discovered the emancipatory potential of endless entertainment, a life of constant distraction and amusement. My understanding of suffering was but a brief glimpse of hapless victims from distant lands on the evening news, as I flicked rapidly through channels, in search of an episode of Gilligan's Island.

As an immigrant adolescent, I had entered a new phase of my assimilation process. I couldn't quite decide whether to dress as a rock star or a disco icon. In either scenario, I committed fashion crimes that are best not discussed at such a distinguished gathering. And then, in my sixteenth year, this world of illusions was suddenly shattered. Back in Iran, the mass executions had accelerated, as the Islamic Republic eliminated political and religious groups that stood in the way of its totalitarian ideology. The so-called Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, had famously said that "criminals should not be tried, they should be killed." Accusation and guilt became one and the same before the Revolutionary Courts, and holding a contrary opinion or belief, became a crime punishable by death.

My family belonged to the Bahá'í religious minority. In Khomeini's murderous theology, we were condemned as a wayward sect, infidels and apostates, who should either convert or be killed. He found our belief in the equality of men and women particularly infuriating. Among those who were arrested was my sixteen-year-old contemporary Mona Mahmudnizhad from the city of Shiraz. She was defiant and deeply committed to fighting for justice. In a high school essay in which she was expected to praise the revolution, she wrote:

> *Why am I not free to express my ideas …? Why don't you give me freedom of speech… Yes, liberty is a Divine gift, and this gift is for us also, but you don't let us have it*

Mona's inspiring courage would exact a heavy price. On 18 June 1983, she and nine other Bahá'í women were executed by hanging.

When news came of Mona's execution, I asked myself: "Why her, and not me?" What divided us was that my family had the good fortune of moving to Canada, while hers remained in Iran. The injustice seemed so random in this world of extremes. Her heroism exposed the emptiness of the consumerist culture that surrounded me in Canada. "What was my freedom worth" I asked, "if it was wasted on selfish mediocrity?" I was confronted with the stark contrast between a meaningless life and a meaningful death. Faced with these existential questions, the pursuit of global justice was not a career choice; it was my only path of redemption.

As I grappled with the grave injustice in the home I once knew, I set out on a painful journey in pursuit of justice. I found many others, also in search of answers, whether in the unlikely encounter between an Inuit and an Iranian, or in the many other places around the world that I would discover. What I would learn is that all human beings suffer the same, that amidst the pain and sorrow there is also a profound joy in defending the downtrodden, in helping others heal. I would discover that the shared humanity that binds us together is more powerful than anything that divides us. The journey that followed those dark years in the 1980s took me to extraordinary places and people that I would otherwise have never met. From Bosnia and Rwanda to Guatemala and Cambodia, Iraq and Myanmar, I would encounter many wounded souls, wailing and wandering, also in search of answers, crying for justice in a cruel world.

Upon graduating from law school, still in my 20s, I had the good fortune of being one of the pioneers of the ad hoc International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, established by the UN Security Council in 1993. It was an unprecedented response to the horrors of "ethnic cleansing" in Croatia and Bosnia. My first UN flight to besieged Sarajevo was memorable. At the check-in counter, someone had scribbled a sign: "Maybe Airlines." Maybe you will arrive, maybe you won't! Upon arrival, driving into the city from the airport, with sniper fire and artillery attacks and the dead people scattered on the streets, the graffiti on a wall said: "Welcome to Hell". The scenes were shocking. In a village called Ahmići, we discovered in a burnt home the charred remains of a family with small children. I

came to Bosnia trying to save the world, but I would leave just trying to save myself! Some things can never be unseen; they leave lasting but invisible scars that others might not see or understand. And they leave us with moral certitude, that justice must be pursued, no matter how unrealistic, even against overwhelming odds,

The success of the Yugoslav Tribunal was far from guaranteed. While the Nuremberg Tribunal was criticized for dispensing "Victor's Justice", it could at least arrest the vanquished Nazi leaders without impediment. But in the former Yugoslavia, the war was still raging, and there was no means of arresting the accused. In the years that followed, circumstances would change with numerous arrests by UN peacekeepers, and the extradition of President Milošević in 2001 to stand trial in The Hague would become a defining moment for accountability in global politics.

The Yugoslav Tribunal was followed in 1994 with a second ad hoc International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, in response to the horrific genocide of the Tutsi that claimed almost one million lives. There too, trials such as that of Prime Minister Kambanda would represent a significant step forward for accountability. These were the first post-Nuremberg criminal jurisdictions, some 50 years after the trial of Nazi leaders first introduced the idea of international accountability. In the post-Cold War window of opportunity that existed in the 1990s, they became the catalyst for the establishment of the International Criminal Court at the Rome Diplomatic Conference in 1998. At long last, there would be a permanent court in The Hague for holding world leaders accountable, even if its jurisdiction and enforcement powers were quite limited.

These developments were unimaginable when I was a law student, dreaming that such a day would come in the distant future. The Court is still marginalized in global politics, and it has been accused by some of politicization and "lawfare". It is praised when its accusations are politically expedient and criticized when such accusations are inconvenient. The Court is at a crucial crossroads, where it must navigate the complexities of global politics such that it maintains its impartiality and independence. A Court that is weak in a heavily politicized international order must at least have legitimacy in the eyes of the world community. It must uphold the highest standards of professional competence and integrity. The Court faces several challenges, and it could certainly improve. But its mere existence reflects the tremendous progress

that has been made in the historical evolution of global justice. It is an institution representing the shift from signing human rights treaties that are violated with impunity to a means for their enforcement. This is a difficult and complex historical process, and no doubt, there will be many mistakes and setbacks.

While these developments are cause for hope, it is difficult to disregard the terrible ordeal of survivors around the world, for whom justice will always remain inadequate. It is easy looking at the arena of suffering from the safe distance of The Hague "bubble" and other elite circles, to remain aloof from the reality of life-long trauma that many must endure. There is also the bigger philosophical question of whether it is ever possible to punish crimes such as genocide in light of their exceptional magnitude. As Hannah Arendt said after the Nuremberg Judgment, the Nazi atrocities "exploded the limits of the law." For the victims, justice is at once essential and elusive. Justice, however, is not just about punishing this or that political leader or military commander. In a deeper sense, it is about reclaiming a lost humanity; it is about reckoning with the past to build a better future. And we have much to learn from those who have lost everything, who, in their resilience and determination, remind us why human rights matter.

Hope is much more than a passing sentiment. It is the lodestar, the astonishing light of our being, that guides us in the darkness of despair. We witness it in the resistance of a political prisoner in the torture chamber, the youth crying for freedom in front of bullets and batons, the tears of a mother mourning her unjustly killed child, the dream of a refugee braving the sea in a rubber dinghy in search of a better life, the prayer of an orphaned child in a war-torn land wishing for peace. But beyond such extreme circumstances, we also witness hope in our daily acts of humanity. We witness it when we choose to help those in distress that cross our path, when we stand in solidarity against bullying and intimidation of the vulnerable, when we reach out to others beyond our own community to build bridges, when we open our eyes and refuse to become a bystander.

It has been said that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. But doing something cannot be equated with ideological posturing in the ivory tower or virtue signaling on social media. We cannot achieve meaningful change without struggle, sacrifice and suffering. When we are withered by life's disappointments, when cynicism weighs on our soul, we do have the

choice, to turn wounds into wisdom, to become better instead of bitter. In fact, we discover the power of our resilience only when confronting the depths of despair.

When we ponder the corruption and violence surrounding us, we must be mindful of the disease and not the symptoms. It has been said that the Holocaust did not begin in the gas chambers; it began with words. It began with the demonization of others, in denying a shared humanity. "Propaganda is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert" Hitler wrote in 1924, when he was still a marginal figure in German public life. Throughout history, authoritarian leaders of all stripes have understood the imperative necessity of creating imaginary enemies, of demonizing others as a means of homogenizing the ignorant impressionable masses, exploiting fear and hatred to incite the mob and ultimately, to achieve totalitarian control. What we see today not far from here is no exception.

It is also remarkable that radical evil has always been committed in the name of the Good. In justifying the extermination of European Jews, Heinrich Himmler said that: "Anti-Semitism is exactly the same as delousing. Getting rid of lice is not a question of ideology, it is a matter of cleanliness." In Bosnia, slaughtering the innocent was elevated to a glorious act of "ethnic cleansing." The Serb leader Radovan Karadžić had proudly said of the Muslims: "they will disappear! Sarajevo will be a melting pot in which 300,000 Muslims will die." In Rwanda, the *génocidaire*s equated the extermination of Tutsi children with cleaning an infestation: "A cockroach gives birth to another cockroach" was their slogan. In Iraq, ISIS condemned the Yazidi as "devil worshippers and satanists" to justify their murder and sexual enslavement in the name of religious purification. The victimization of others is always preceded by their dehumanization; it is always justified by appealing to an ostensibly lofty goal.

We cannot destroy those we consider to be equal in dignity, equal in rights. In creating enemies in our fertile imagination, we are not concerned with the truth. Rather, we seek to portray others as monsters to rationalize our own monstrosity. Those identified as the enemy become a blank screen on which the hate-monger projects all the fears and fantasies of his own making, all the negative qualities that threaten his own fragile self-image. It is a desperate want of power masquerading as real power. As Jean-Paul Sartre famously said in 1944 after the liberation of Paris: "Si le Juif n'existait pas, l'antisémite l'inventerait." "If the Jew did not

exist, the anti-Semite would invent him." The demon to be destroyed exists first and foremost in the twisted mind of the practitioner of hatred. Scapegoating is an expression of cowardice, a defense mechanism, that allows us to blame others for our own inadequacies. It is a self-destructive deflection, to avoid the hard work of reflection and transformation without which we can never grow. This is a psychological reality that we need to confront more so than ever as demagogues offer us illusions of glory in an imaginary past that never existed, making chauvinism and violence great again.

Hatred is ultimately a form of self-harm because it brings with it the negation of our own humanity and the problem of identification with the suffering of others. At the Nuremberg trials, Paul Blobel, one of the members of the murderous Einstzgruppe extermination squads, testified that "our men who took part in these executions suffered more from nervous exhaustion than those who had to be shot." It was a twisted empathy for the perpetrators, and none for the victims, but it does say much about the self-inflicted consequences of violence. The SS troops who shot thirty-four thousand Jews in Babi Yar ravine near Kyiv were also devoted family men at home. Many were traumatized and suffered breakdowns. Just as they murdered children in cold blood, they would also sit around the dinner table sharing a meal and adoring their own children. Somewhere in their conscience, they would have had to reconcile these two extremes, with the comforting words of Himmler that they were doing the noble work of eliminating lice.

Perhaps the reality today is not the same as the Nazi past, but we must remain vigilant against cynical and cruel currents seeking to normalize hatred. After all, who could have imagined that racial supremacists and corrupt oligarchs would occupy such a prominent place in the mainstream of American politics? I used to watch *House of Cards* on *Netflix* some years ago. Its cynical absurdity was quality fiction writing. Today, I could get a better show watching Fox News.

And just as we look critically at our neighbours to the south, let us not be too self-satisfied in Canada. We have witnessed in recent years the premeditated murder of a Muslim family run over by a truck in London, Ontario, this following the massacre of worshippers at a mosque in Québec City. We have witnessed an alarming resurgence of antisemitism, including arson attacks against Jewish schools and synagogues. There was during the COVID-19 pandemic, a sharp rise in racial violence against Chinese Canadians, on the pretext of the so-called "Wuhan virus".

And racism against Indigenous peoples remains a historical affliction on our society. I cannot forget the hearings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls that I attended in Winnipeg in 2017. The testimony was truly shocking. We are certainly not immune from such dark divisive forces in Canada. We must remain vigilant. We must prepare to defend the fortress of human dignity, because times will become more difficult.

Divisive ideologies are especially appealing in times of turbulence and transition, when the psychological comfort of blaming others is an expedient solution. Our fragile psyche craves false confidence over confusion and chaos, a delusional certitude that is resistant to reason and reflection. In fact, we are witnessing this entrenchment primarily because of the acceleration of an already inextricable and inescapable interdependence. The divisive boundaries we have created in our imagination for so long, the construction of our identities by the exclusion of others are rapidly eroding, whether we like it or not. The narrow self-definitions of the past are now under assault as we confront not the romantic feel-good sentiments that were once associated with globalization, but the quite difficult realities of an obsolete and collapsing order that must be replaced by new ideals and institutions. We are witnessing the unfolding of a new world with both unprecedented perils and possibilities. We live in an age that requires us to walk into the unknown with courage and unity.

We are inexorably moving towards a world-embracing identity that is forcing us to embrace a planetary civilization, not because it is a lofty vision or ideal, but because of the inescapable reality that our destinies have become so intertwined, that we have no choice. The rise of insular identities, whether it is xenophobic nationalism, racial supremacy, religious fanaticism, or illiberal ideologies; these resemble a collective infantile regression, a futile retreat from the maturity and wisdom of adult life, when we invariably learn that we are not at the centre of the universe; that we must live in harmony with others. The intensification of these forces is exacerbated by the social media space and the rise of artificial intelligence, that despite its enormous benefits, has also made much worse the social alienation and communal fragmentation that is the malaise of modern life; a malaise that often leaves us in search of meaning and belonging in all the wrong places.

In the most prosperous parts of the world, we are witnessing an unprecedented psychic

pandemic, a prevalence of anxiety and depression, of self-harm and substance abuse, as a corrosive consumerist culture devours our spiritual core; as it eats away at our capacity for authenticity, compassion, and living in community with others. The political struggles that we confront in this age of rage appear more as a question of mental health than political ideology, an increasingly unhinged and misguided search for answers in an imaginary past, at a time when long venerated ideas about our place in the world and our relation to each other must give way to radically new conceptions.

In a world saturated with noise and distraction, greed and narcissism, we must understand the vital necessity of reflection, of a deeper self-understanding of what makes us human. We must pursue genuine engagement in service to society, not as an empty platitude, but as a transformative political act, ushering in new beliefs and behaviours that are not only morally commendable, but also consistent with the reality and requirements of our time. And just as we are poised between religious fanaticism on the one hand, and secular materialism on the other, we have to ask, beyond the law and democratic institutions, that we must protect against the onslaught of authoritarianism, whether it is possible to build a culture of human dignity without a grassroots spiritual revolution. The revolution that we need is one that empowers and transforms people in their most essential social contexts, in the family, in neighbourhoods, in communities and places of work, where much of our meaning and purpose is generated, in daily habits and routines. That revolution is not achieved by ideological control, finger-pointing and cancel culture. It is achieved by compassion and concern for the welfare of others.

Is this not the frontline in the struggle for lasting progress, beyond the whims and fortunes of politics or the clever musings of pundits and experts? The seismic shifts in consciousness that are the truly revolutionary moments in history do not come from the top down, as they do from the bottom up. Do we not witness, even amidst the divisive discourse and hateful polemics, the emergence, especially among the younger generations, of a new consciousness, that is both local and global, that distinguishes between difference and discrimination, that concerns itself with justice, that speaks truth to power? Even if it is sometimes confusing and chaotic, it is the glimmer of a new world with new possibilities. We must ask how we can steer these forces in the right direction.

Whether we are secular or religious, and whatever identity we assume, or whichever

community we belong to, we must recognize that beyond a legal abstraction or intellectual concept, human rights is a moral belief and social vision. It must take spiritual root among the grassroots if we are to inoculate ourselves against the corrosive and corrupt forces that have come to threaten the democratic ideals that we may have taken for granted. The idea of a life of dignity is not so much a rational argument or utilitarian calculus, as it is a faith in the nobility of our essence; it is the post-modern conception of the sacred, that brings us together in common worship.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 in the shadow of the most cataclysmic conflict in history, declares in Article 1 that:

> *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

Against the blood-stained pages of history, we must not forget that for centuries the enslavement and extermination of the weak by the powerful was accepted. In that light, the widespread belief today in the inherent dignity and rights of all human beings is truly astonishing. We have come so far, even if the journey ahead is long and full of peril. As we watch the unraveling of the liberal societies that we assume represented the end of history, or the consummation of our social evolution on the planet, let us pause and consider what this faith in human rights requires of us.

We come back to the realization that the pursuit of justice is not an abstraction. Its meaning comes to us through empathy and authenticity, feeling the pain of others and assuming responsibility for the world beyond our familiar and comfortable silos. But beyond concerns about middle-class guilt or compassion fatigue, let us also consider the tremendous joy in serving others, the immense power of a shared humanity that eliminates barriers. In living a life of purpose at a time when loneliness and despair have inflicted such profound harm on our spiritual well-being, we should be mindful that in helping others, we are first and foremost our own saviour. We have equated the pursuit of happiness with egotism whereas we must escape the ego to realize our most profound potential. In the words of Rumi, “why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?”

This brings me to another poem from the land of my birth, written by Saadi of Shiraz, born in the year 1210, towards the waning years of the Golden Age of Islam. He wrote with prophetic prescience:

Human beings are members of a whole
In creation of one essence and soul
If one member is afflicted with pain
Other members uneasy will remain
If you have no sympathy for human pain
The name of human you cannot retain.

This poem, reflecting the ancient wisdom of the Persian civilization, was familiar to children of my father's generation. He was born in Iran, sometime during the winter of 1928. The exact date is unknown, but the birth date of summer 1929 in his Canadian passport is definitely not correct. The discrepancy is explained by the fact that parents would typically wait a few months to see if the newborn child would survive before registering the birth. The infant mortality rate at the time was about 50%; average life expectancy just 27- years of age. A mother would typically bury half of her children before they reached the age of 5. There wasn't much time to grieve the loss. There were other hungry mouths to feed, in a home without modern conveniences – like running water or electricity. Life had to go on. If you had the misfortune of belonging to a persecuted minority, the fear of violence by an angry mob supplemented the fear of hunger, cold, disease, and premature death. The idea of human rights, let alone ideological debates about identity politics, was scarcely imaginable. People weren't preoccupied with cancelling others; they were more worried about being cancelled by life.

I was reflecting on the exceptional contrast between the pre-modern and post-modern worlds, as my father celebrated his 96th birthday last year on a Zoom call with his adoring grandchildren; a technological convenience that was still the stuff of science fiction well into his adult life. A man who completed his homework by candlelight in childhood now enjoys stimulating conversations with ChatGPT. His meditation on the poetry of medieval mystics now competes with cat videos on Instagram.

Beyond the tightly knit traditional community to which my father belonged, a world without the modern means of communication and transportation, the idea of belonging to a wider world embracing all humankind would have been at most a moral exhortation, or perhaps a prophetic vision. But as I have suggested, today, the inextricable interdependence of all people seems more an inescapable reality. Except that while we are hyper-connected electronically, we experience only the most superficial connections with others, searching for purpose in the emptiness of an on-line existence, supplanting the inspiring universe with the insolent metaverse. We are liberated from the misery of survival, yet against the

onslaught of social media algorithms and emotional isolation, we sink ever deeper into despair. What's more, our gospel of greed, our cult of consumerism, has unleashed catastrophic climate change, all in the name of progress, and the pursuit of happiness. But I raise this with the suggestion that this dawning realization should fill us with hope. Because for the first time in history, and despite whatever divisive ideology may be the seductive political fashion now, we have reached a point where our survival leaves us with no choice but to set aside our differences and cooperate in common cause.

For some time, the Inuit elders have been saying that the earth has tilted, that its axis has shifted, that the stars have moved. The idea was ridiculed as magical thinking until recent times when scientific evidence discovered a shift in the earth's axis because of the redistribution of mass on the planet, primarily because of the melting of ice sheets and glaciers in the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The most fundamental of human right, it would seem, is the right to a healthy environment, a climate system suitable for human life, without which we would perish.

The recent wildfires here in Manitoba is a powerful reminder that catastrophic climate change is not a distant threat; it is already at our doorstep. The laws of human rights are often violated with impunity, with little recourse for the victims, but now we are up against the laws of the earth, and none can escape its consequences. Ancient wisdom and modern science have converged, and their message is loud and clear: we have reached the limits of a materialistic civilization, and we are now learning the painful way that we are but an insignificant speck in an infinite universe. The earth will go on, with or without us. We are confronted with the reality that whether we like it or not, there is only one planet, with only one people, a single indivisible race, whose continued existence depends on living in harmony with the miraculous natural balance that has made life possible in an otherwise inhospitable galaxy.

Having survived the winter trip to the Arctic in 1984, I returned to Nunavut the following summer to see my friends. I could barely recognize the place that I had previously visited. The constant darkness was now transformed into constant light. A luminous bewildering day had come. The land was resplendent and full of life. All of creation had awakened from the bitter cold. The universe was dancing in ecstasy in the warm embrace of the sun, a reminder that we must be patient with the rhythm of the seasons; a reminder that it is exactly in the

darkest moment of the night that dawn will come.

With gratitude for your patience, for your presence, and for your commitment to human betterment, I will end with a poem inspired by Hafez, from Shiraz, where Mona drew her last breath:

Even After All this time
The Sun never says to the Earth
"You Owe Me."
Look What happens
With a Love like That
It lights the whole sky.