

Learning about dignity

Dec 23, 2011

On Dec. 19 the United Nations General Assembly, meeting in New York, adopted a historic new U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training.

As the first internationally agreed standard for human rights education officially proclaimed by the U.N., the new document provides an important foundation for empowering people by raising awareness of all human rights including the rights set out and guaranteed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent international covenants. It should enable intensified efforts toward the building of a universal culture of human rights.

For alongside legal guarantees of human rights — and remedies in the event they are violated — it is ultimately necessary to foster, through education, human behavior that is based on an appreciation of the dignity of every life, and thereby prevent violations from occurring in the first place.

The Declaration reflects the voices of civil society as it was made possible through the dedicated efforts of, in particular, the governments of Costa Rica, Italy, Morocco, the Philippines, Senegal, Slovenia and Switzerland, working together over a four-year period with key nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) committed to promoting human rights education, and in the U.N. Human Rights Council. Adoption of the Declaration creates a framework in which governments and civil society groups can work together to encourage more people to participate actively in fostering a culture of human rights.

Austregesilo de Athayde, the renowned Brazilian man of letters who was involved in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, once told me: “The heart of all discussions of human rights is the battle against discrimination. All human beings are equal. No discrimination is permissible. Absolutely none.”

I agree completely with these passionate words, and believe that the dignity of the individual must be the starting point of all human rights initiatives and learning.

The effects of human rights education can be dramatic in awakening people to the value and power of their own lives, as shown in the following stories.

A young Indian girl recounts how she was considering taking her own life because of accumulated problems of discrimination and violence. She remembered what her teacher had told her: that she had rights. So she chose not to die. Now she dreams of becoming such a teacher herself.

A woman in Turkey describes how human rights training gave her a sense of power and ended the desperate isolation from which she had been suffering because of an abusive family situation. Now she proudly says she has the right to smile. Human rights education made her aware of the many people working together to protect women's rights.

Their powerful testimonies will be introduced in an educational DVD on human rights education which is currently being prepared in cooperation between Soka Gakkai International and Human Rights Education Associates and in partnership with the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

A commitment to human rights cannot be fostered simply through the transmission of knowledge. Action and experience play a crucial role in the learning process. When children, for example, confront a situation of bullying among peers, how can they be empowered not only to refuse to participate but to be part of the effort to stop it?

It is only through such real-life daily struggles and challenges that a genuine sensitivity to human rights can be inculcated. This is a truth that is not limited to school education: it applies to all of us.

The foundation of a culture of human rights is established when we can develop an empathetic openness toward the sufferings of others, feeling their pain as our own, and when we can ceaselessly strive to bring out our "best self," to behave at all times and in all situations in a manner that we can proudly affirm.

Of course, the extent to which the U.N. Declaration will actually make a difference to the lives of vulnerable people around the world will depend largely on the efforts of NGOs and civil society groups as well as those of U.N. member states. I would like to offer three concrete proposals:

The first concerns the establishment of a U.N. body that will promote human rights education and training. I would urge NGOs and NGO networks for human rights education to take the initiative to establish an international council for human rights education, working in close consultation with the U.N. Human Rights Council and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The second is for strengthening coordinated regional efforts for human rights education with a special focus on youth. Opportunities should be provided to youth for human rights education through direct personal encounters and exchanges across national borders.

My third proposal regards interfaith dialogue toward building a culture of human rights. I would like to suggest that religious traditions engage in dialogue and “compete” with one another constructively in their efforts to contribute and to foster individuals who will take action toward achieving this common goal.

The work of establishing universal human rights starts with a transformation in the awareness and behavior of each individual. And persistent efforts at human rights education and learning can, as they develop into a broad-based grassroots movement, lay the solid ethical foundations for a flourishing culture of human rights.

Human rights will be a powerful force for the transformation of reality when they are not simply understood as externally defined norms of behavior but are lived as the spontaneous manifestation of internalized values. For it is not because they have been codified into law that human rights have value. The spiritual wellspring that supports the law is found in the struggle to gain and realize our rights.

The brilliance of human rights lies in the endless succession of courageous individuals who arise to take up the challenge of extending and expanding them as heirs to that spirit.