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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the Community Convocation honouring the
60th Anniversary of the birth of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Living the Dream: Ending the Deficit in Human Will"

The Cathedral of St John the Divine – New York
15 January 1989

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"LIVING THE DREAM: ENDING THE DEFICIT IN HUMAN WILL"

Sixty years ago today our world was graced with the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. Twenty-one years ago he was taken from us. In the 21 years since Dr. King's death, his own children, who so inspired his dreams, have grown into adulthood. It has been 21 years in which some of his dreams have become reality, but too many have not. Twenty-one years in which we have seen a very different America, and a very different world, evolve. In many ways, the world in which we live is encouragingly better; in many ways, it is disappointingly not.

Martin Luther King's dreams for his children were not unlike the dreams that all parents have for their children. For many parents, and for their children, those dreams will come true. For too many - by far the majority of the world's parents and children - they will not. And for too many, the dream is as simple as that their children might live to adulthood. For too many, they will not.

Our current decade has brought dramatic collapse to many of the expectations of the continued steady economic progress of the previous several decades. This collapse has especially impacted upon the poorer sectors of society - worldwide, and in the United States.

Throughout this decade the poor have often grown poorer - whether we are talking about slums and farming communities of the United States or the poorest people and poorest nations of the developing world. National debt, which so undermines social programmes in this country, has taken a shameful

toll in the Third World. The deaths of half a million children last year alone can be attributed to the slowdown in economic growth and massive retrenchment in public expenditures for health, education and other services vital to well-being. Meanwhile, in an awesome reversal since 1980, the developing nations last year transferred some \$40 billion net to the industrialized countries.

And it is a sad fact - and commentary - that, from country after country - including the United States - reports continue to indicate that women and children have shouldered a disproportionate burden of the recession and adjustment to it - from the loss of incomes and employment to the severe cutbacks in government support services for poor children and mothers...those who are characteristically weak and vulnerable politically as well as economically.

The grave results of these past eight years of decline show in such glaring indicators as falling school enrolment, rising malnutrition, and even increasing child deaths.

The fragile lives counted in these worsening statistics are not children who died in earthquakes. They are not accident victims. They are not even those killed in wars. They are children who went hungry and malnourished and diseased and neglected even without a disaster or famine because their families were caught up in the "silent emergencies" - trapped in the crossfire of extreme poverty and gross underdevelopment.

They are tens of millions of children - some 14 million each year - who have died quietly, in the arms of their mothers. In our times - this week, last week, next week - 40,000 children die every day...the equivalent of almost two Armenian earthquakes each day, but with all of the victims young children - our most vulnerable - and our greatest hope. And they are children not only in distant corners of the earth, but in the neighborhoods outside this Cathedral - where children die at rates double the national average.

Must they die? Must those who survive grow up stunted, dulled, and lacking hope? Must their parents be denied their dreams? Can we end the grotesque waste of promising lives to poverty and hunger? Let Martin Luther King's words shout the answer:

"I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present ... makes him incapable of reaching up for the 'oughtness' that forever confronts him."

The world can change

Let us reach for the oughtness.

Changing this world of children-without-dreams is a formidable task. But we have undertaken formidable tasks before. And while we have not always completely succeeded, we have surely made the world a far better place than it was when we began.

Consider, after all, the extraordinary transformations of the world in these past four decades since World War II:

- ... Where then we had - in 1945 - only some 60 "countries" - (just two in Africa) and another 100 colonies serving their "owners" ... today we have some 160 independent countries sitting as sovereign nations at the United Nations (soon to be joined, hopefully, by one more: Namibia).
- ... Where then we had, in this country, black and other minority people denied their right to vote, ordered to the back of the bus, barred from community swimming pools, isolated in inferior schools, and chained by law and social order into a permanent second - or "third" or "fourth" - class citizenship ... today equality is the law of the land, and legal segregation is no more. Real victory - of equality of opportunity - has not yet been fully won, but as surely as Martin marched from Selma to Montgomery and got there, one day we shall all get there, too.
- ... Where once we had smoke stacks belching who-knows-what into our air, and our rivers on fire ... today we are beginning to have not only laws but a consciousness that the environment around us is a most precious possession, and almost anywhere, you can once again breathe the air and swim in the rivers, and we are moving, slowly, to recognize that it is a global ecology about which we must care, and not just for as far as our own eyes can see.
- ... Where once the woman's only place was widely said to be in the home ... today she is the fastest growing segment of the workforce, and more and more she is on both sides of the desk. Still a long way to go, but oh, so far she has come.
- ... Where once smoking and alcohol were the very embodiment of style and sophistication and maturity ... today they are increasingly recognized as symbols of self-destructiveness and danger to others.

The world does change. It can be made to change. And the waste of what "is" can be changed toward what "ought" to be.

Mobilizing for children

UNICEF, the organization which I head, is at this time totally engaged in trying to bring about another great change from what is to what ought to be.

At the beginning of the 1980s, UNICEF described what it saw as "New Hope in Dark Times" - the possibility of a virtual revolution in child survival and development, accomplishable at low financial cost even in economically difficult times - if only governments and national leaderships could marshal the political will to try.

Our proposition was simple: that the annual toll of some 15 million child deaths could be halved within 10-15 years through the mobilization in all

countries of today's new communications capacity to empower the vast majority of families with knowledge of vital low-cost techniques - such as immunization against the six main child-killing diseases, oral rehydration therapy to combat the lethal effects of diarrhoeal diseases, and the importance of breastfeeding, safe weaning, and birth spacing.

In the past year, the deaths of 7,000 children every day - 2.5 million annually - were prevented as a result of this combination of knowledge with techniques. We hope to double these daily savings in just two years.

The success of an increasing number of poor countries in reducing child mortality proves that progress is possible despite great odds - even severe economic hardships. Their success has shown what is possible - even in low income countries or low income communities - when the needs of children are placed high on a country's political agenda over a sustained period, and priority is given to cost-effective programmes. Active engagement in the Child Survival and Development Revolution has proven that many countries are now capable of dramatic improvements within a short period of 5 to 10 years.

At the heart of this approach (and this is also of relevance to the industrialized countries - and New York City) is the use of social support and communications systems which, through low-cost means involving community participation, empower parents - and mostly women - to take far greater control of their own and their children's health.

Can the rich do as well as the poor?

We have seen that even poor countries can marshal the capacity to save their children's lives and better protect their national futures by wise investment of modest resources, strategically aimed, with impact maximized by the commitment of genuine leadership and national will. The question arises whether a rich country - indeed, the world's richest country - can do as well.

The fundamental task of saving - and improving - children's lives has become increasingly relevant in this country. The United States, the richest nation in the world, has slipped from 10th in 1960 to only 22nd in 1986 among the countries of the world, when ranked by its infant mortality rate. The true scope of the problem in the United States shows up when compared with many countries which now have lower infant and child death rates. These countries include not only East Germany, Ireland, Spain, and Australia, but also some so-called developing countries like Hong Kong and Singapore.

The USSR has also slipped - to 35th in the world.

Isn't the time now ripe for the two great superpowers to switch from competing in military might to providing leadership in improving the well-being of their children - all children - the only real security for our future? Shouldn't we pursue the Reagan-Gorbachev offer, and their call, of last May at the Moscow Summit, for intensified international efforts for reducing the scale of preventable childhood deaths through the most effective

methods of saving children? Why not a summit of world leaders, as President Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Prime Minister Carlsson of Sweden supported last month, on the great needs and opportunities now available for protecting today's children - and tomorrow's world?

How fares the city?

The United States of America could, indeed, be a shining city on the hill ... a beacon to all humanity for the society we ought to have. It is, quite frankly, inexcusable that the richest and most powerful country in the world should rank so poorly in ensuring the survival and development of its children. At federal, state, and community levels, this society ought to ensure that knowledge regarding self-health behaviours reaches the entire populace, and that adequate nutrition, health services and early-childhood development information and resources are readily available to all women and families.

How is it that so many countries - now including developing countries - are doing such a better job at this than the United States? What is the missing ingredient? Where can the leadership come from to do a better job for America and for the world?

The issue is leadership

Martin Luther King showed us that one of the places that true and powerful leadership can start is from below - from those who are not in power, but who are most affected or who share understanding that the city on the hill cannot shine on wasted children. This is the path taken by most of the great, progressive movements of modern history: for the abolition of slavery; for the enfranchisement of women; for the end of colonial empires; for the extension of civil rights to people of colour; and for the protection of the environment. This is the path which begins with people - like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Rachel Carson - whose voice and frustration will not be stilled. Gradually, usually ever-so-gradually, those voices are joined by more people, and then by organizations, institutions and more and more voices of authority and influence.

In effect, what I am saying is that in both the developing countries and the developed, in Bombay or the Bronx, a major frontier for progress even in difficult economic times lies with educating and empowering individuals to do more to help themselves. The role of government and society is to facilitate and support this process, and not, as is too often the case, to impede it.

The implications of this empowerment go far beyond the immediate objective of saving children's lives, important as that may be. As people build their ability to take care of their families, and build their confidence in their personal capacity to do so, they strengthen their ability to build their communities ... and their nations ... and to truly take control of their own future.

Isn't that exactly what Martin Luther King was all about? That people ought to be able - enabled and not denied ... liberated and not repressed ... empowered and not controlled - to build their own future?

We must all be revolutionaries

Fostering a climate in which government makes possible the ability of people to protect themselves is a challenge to which the American public, particularly those experienced and accomplished in the struggle for the rights of all people, can make a major contribution. People like those of you who are present in this Cathedral today. You are part of a leadership force which can build toward the education and empowerment of people which is essential - just as you did with civil rights, protection of our environment and women's rights. You can help make the difference which, ultimately, gives every person far greater power to make a difference for his or her own life, as well as that of others.

What must we, here in this Cathedral today, ask of each other?

I ask for your vocal support and long term solidarity with what we in UNICEF are trying to do, often against very great odds and sometimes in the face of criticism, for the children of the developing world. We need your support and we need it over the long haul. We need your voice to say and to keep on saying to our leaders something that Dr. King himself said after his own visit to India. After seeing the suffering of the developing world at first hand, Martin Luther King said this on Christmas Eve 1967:

"As I beheld these conditions, something within me cried out: 'Can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned?' And an answer came back 'Oh no!'."

At the same time as asking for your support - in asking that same question and urging that same answer - I would also say to you that the struggle that so many of you here are already engaged in - the struggle for a more decent life for deprived communities here in the United States - is essentially the same struggle. And I offer you our voice and our solidarity in the indivisible cause of giving voice to those who are not heard, hope to those who have lost hope, power to those who have been ignored.

Whether the struggle is against the fact that more than one in every ten children born in the poor world will not live to see their first birthday, or whether it is against the injustice of child death rates here in Harlem which are twice as high as in other parts of this city, it is the same struggle.

It is, in the tradition of Martin Luther King and of Mahatma Gandhi before him, the struggle to give voice to those who have not been heard ... hope to those who have been without hope ... and power to those who have been ignored by the powerful.

The world's children can be given an entirely different future than they

look forward to today. For tens of millions of children, that can mean the difference between having a future or none at all. It is within our capacity; the question is whether we shall want to make it happen.

To quote from that same Christmas Eve speech by Martin Luther King twenty years ago:

"It really boils down to this. All life is inter-related. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

"We must finally believe," said Dr King, "in the ultimate morality of the universe ... and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations."

I conclude by humbly adding to that ultimately moral view of the universe. I add the thought that morality must march with changing capacity.

Today we have the capacity, as never before, to put an end to mass child deaths and mass child malnutrition across the developing continents of the world. Today we have, as never before, the capacity to end - to end readily - the deprivation and suffering of so many children and families in under-developed communities of the United States. And it is that abundant capacity which makes it no longer conscionable to tolerate these evils. They are no longer inevitable. They are therefore no longer acceptable.

Martin Luther King posed the issue as a question:

"Why", he asked, "should there be hunger and privation in any land, on any table, when man has the resources and the know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?"

His answer was this:

"There is no deficit in human resources: the deficit is in human will."

More than twenty years later, when our capacity to end poverty has become even more abundant and ready at hand, what greater homage could we offer to the man to whom we owe so much for making the world a better place, than to help bridge that gap between the means and the will ... between capacity and morality ... between what can be done and what will be done?

Why not a World Summit for Children in the next 12 months? And why not a parallel New York City summit composed not only of municipal authorities but also of private leaders and civic groups? And why not summits of community leaders in every borough and neighborhood of this world's greatest city?

Will our community - of New York ... of America ... of humanity - take that responsibility?

The answer begins with us.