

The Right to Be Human

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Taken from Father Joseph Wresinski's remarks to allies and friends of ATD Fourth World, 9 November 1980.

(Original: French¹)

When we speak of human rights, we often forget that fighting for human rights means fighting for the right to be human.

What does it mean to be human?

To be human is to be a person who is recognised as such, and recognised as being able to accomplish the significant acts of life. What are these great acts of existence? To think, to believe, to love, and to meditate. We are truly human only to the extent that we are able to do these things.

What is a human being?

Human beings are able to shape their own ideas – not necessarily alone of course. They are attuned to the world, and can construct their own ideas about God, about the significance of beauty, truth, and goodness, about humanity itself, and about the meaning of life and death and the afterlife. People who are truly able to fashion their own ideas on these great themes of human existence – they are human.

Essentially, a human being can be summed up by these philosophical maxims:

I have ideas; I think, therefore I am human.

I love, therefore I am human.

I meditate, therefore I am human.

I pray, therefore I am human.

I believe, therefore I am human.

But the tragedy of people in the underclass² is that they do not have these opportunities. And why not? Because they are not in a position to ask themselves essential questions about life. Human beings are people who have an organised mind, who are able to follow their own thought processes, to follow them all the way to the end, and to take in everything they have heard, learned, seen, and observed, and make it a matter of inner reflection, a kind of self-identification. And at the same time, this thought process allows them to assimilate what they have learned into their broad family and social environment and give these things significance: in a word, to incorporate this into universal experience. We are not human if our spirit cannot induce in us a sense of belonging in the universe. This is why we speak so much about memory within our movement, because only a movement can introduce dispossessed people into a universal experience, into a universal consciousness.

In a word, a human being is someone who can answer three essential questions:

"Who are you?"

"I am a person."

"Where do you live?"

"I live on the earth. I am a citizen of the earth. I belong here."

"What do you do?"

¹ *Revue Quart Monde*, 203 (2007/3).

² Joseph Wresinski employed here the term *sous-proletariat*, used in France in the mid-twentieth century to refer to the underclass, the most disadvantaged, vulnerable, and exploited working-class people.

"I am building the world."

Human beings who do not realise they are playing an active role in shaping the world come to believe they are parasites, that they are worthless. People of the Fourth World are conscious of this, intimately aware of it. This is why they envy us so much. In the end, the difficulty we face in meeting people in poverty, whether we are members of the ATD volunteer corps or not, is that the population, the underclass, is envious of us because we can answer these three essential questions: Who are you? Where do you live? What do you do? And they are aware of this fact. They know it.

To me, born into the Fourth World, this was my permanent envy. Permanent. I have known only this in the world. And all around me, all those people in poverty I have met over almost fifty years have never said anything different.

The capacity to love

The second ability, an ability that really enables us to express who we are – the person we should be – is the capacity to love; that is to say, to place another person at the level of one's own concerns. That is what it means to love: to include another person among one's own concerns, not as secondary concerns, but as major ones. To love is also to confirm to other people that they are important, not only for us but for themselves, that they exist for themselves, that they are important because they are themselves, and that it is this importance of themselves that constitutes who they are and that counts for us. For it is this that the Fourth World needs, and only when they understand this will they be freed of their envy.

When this occurs, when the other person feels equal in our eyes, not simply because they are useful to us, or because we need them in order to feel better about ourselves, or in order to fill our own solitude, only then will they take on an inalienable importance. And people in poverty know this. We should not imagine that even if they don't have a well-defined way of thinking, they are pieces of wood or stones or water. Not at all.

In moments of clarity, they will speak to you. They have said it to me many times: "I am of use to you. I'm of use to you." And they can tell each of us what we know to be true: "I'm of use to you. You need me, don't you, not because I am what I am, but because you need me to get your studies done, or to express yourself, or to achieve something, or to fight your battles? I am useful to you, not because of what I am but because I bring you something that you jealously keep for yourself."

This "other person", this other person who is the most deprived of all, these people who are important in and of themselves, and who are important for us, it is they – the most disadvantaged – whom our movement has chosen. It is with those at the bottom of the social ladder, with those most deprived of power, of collective thinking, and of possibilities to love, that we have wanted to join forces. More than anyone, those are the people whom our movement invites you to meet and to regard as important in themselves and for themselves. They count for us. They are our brothers and sisters. This is the option we have chosen.

Emerging from the depths of despair

This is our fight for human rights: to enable people in the depths of despair, at the bottom of the social ladder, to emerge as human beings, so that they can take control of their ability to think and to love, which have been with them since birth. From the moment they are born, all human beings have within themselves these faculties, these latent possibilities. And I make no call to simplistic Rousseauism³ here. Human beings

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose treatises and novels inspired the leaders of the French Revolution and the Romantic generation

are made to think. They are made to love. And they know this. Young people know it at 16 years old, and they know it when they are 40.

It is life – unfair, unequal, and dependent – that has damaged these faculties. In reality, people in extreme poverty have been mutilated. They have had their wings clipped, so to speak. But how can we help people rise from the depths of human despair, from misery and from solitude? How can we enable this human being, this stranger, to emerge?

They are strangers, outsiders, and we should consider this fact. In a geographical sense, they have always lived outside the cities. People have said it: they are outcasts. They are strangers in society, strangers to culture, and strangers to religion. They are not party to any spirituality. They are not identified with a particular god. In a word, they have no identity. These people – these strangers without an identity – we want them to emerge.

This has always been the case and has always been the condition of the poorest people in Africa, Latin America, India, and Australia – on all five continents. All five. You will never meet, on any of these five continents, a person who exists at the bottom of the social scale who is not a stranger. But a stranger is someone who is afraid of others, afraid as soon as something unusual or unfamiliar crosses their path. Then they lose their bearings. They are no longer able to think. They overreact. They are lost. Why? Because they are not recognised, not accepted by others. And the person before them is always capable of introducing into their lives something unusual, unexpected, constraining, controlling, and manipulative. People living in chronic poverty know this too well. They have lived through it and passed it down from generation to generation. And that is why they are afraid of priests, mayors, teachers, and social workers. They are afraid of anyone with power. They are afraid of ATD workers and allies who come to their door. They are afraid. And people who are afraid cannot give life to their ideas. They cannot accomplish the actions essential to their own life, to their existence as a person. They cannot be human. And human beings who are without status, unrecognised, and strangers among their peers – people who are afraid – they are of no use. And this is why people in extreme poverty, who know this only too well, are destroyed by not being useful to others.

Now, when we speak of not being useful, we usually refer to not being useful in the workplace because we live in a work-driven society. But there are forms of uselessness that are even worse. There is social uselessness. There is uselessness in the family. There is religious, spiritual, and cultural uselessness. People of the Fourth World know themselves to be of no use, on all counts and at all levels.

From solidarity to fraternity

The duty of human beings – and what is at stake with human rights – is to be where we will be of most use to society, among our peers. But this is impossible for people who live in extreme poverty. And that is why we join forces with them. It is why our fundamental choice is with these people, our peers, my people – yes, personally, my own people. For I have known them from the day I began understanding who the population was that I was living among, and understanding the people around me. I was myself a stranger, a stranger constantly riddled by fear and feeling utterly useless.

The first reaction, a concrete step that our movement is committed to with people living in poverty is first and foremost solidarity. We are in solidarity with this population, which means that we refuse the structures and systems that oppress them because of injustice, because of their lack of freedom, because of dependence, and because of ignorance often sought and intended for the Fourth World, which prevents them from being stimulated by their own reasoning and structured thinking, and from carrying out those essential human actions.

and who held that human beings are inherently good by nature, civil society being responsible for the corruption of their virtue and morality.

Our second step is to allow solidarity to develop into fraternity. Solidarity does not penetrate our souls, does not engage who we are as human beings. Solidarity is only a way to fight the system. Solidarity must be transformed into fraternity, and this is what our movement calls you for. This is what we aim to do as members of our movement: to create a bond of fraternity between ourselves and the Fourth World. This means that the other person must be recognised as my equal and that, since the other is my equal, they have the right to share with me the best of what I am.

For fraternity means to share the best of what we are. It is not sharing a struggle or a fight. No. That is solidarity. Fraternity means the other person has rights over us. In solidarity, other people have no rights over us; they are companions who have something in common with us. But this is not the case here. Here, other people have rights over us, and what they do not have, they have the right to ask for. And what we do not have, we have the right to ask of them. This is what fraternity means: a common responsibility of mutual sharing.

And here, we are at the heart of this challenge. For here, it is not only we who share, but it is also the Fourth World who shares with us. It is not only they who count on us; but it is also we who count on them. This is fraternity.

Access to knowledge, access to respect

This does not just mean that we teach them to read, write, and count, which falls within the realm of catching up, of repairing the damage that has been done.

Nor is it just to foster a love of school by means of cultural centres, street libraries, and what we could call "prevention". No, it is not only that. What interests us is not only to arouse people's curiosity, focus their attention, and suggest methods they could use. For us – and it is important to think hard about this – it is a question of re-shaping the minds and hearts of men, women, and children of the proletarian underclass. And, in the process, to re-shape our own hearts.

People talk about that famous hypnotic look: simply by looking at someone, the person can suddenly read and write. Amazing! And it's true. But why? Because we and the person in front of us become changed people, different people, new people; and consequently people who learn what we have learned ourselves: solidarity through sharing and fraternity through respect. For what is important, for us as well as for people who live in deep poverty, is respect for ourselves and respect for others.

It seems to me that we have not stressed enough that, essentially, introducing people to knowledge is introducing them above all to respect. For they are not able to respect themselves, or even to respect one another, since they are trapped, locked in hardship. And men and women who are trapped by hardship are forced to do things that life or their instincts require them to do.

This is what our movement is. It aims to re-shape our own hearts and minds and those of people living in poverty, in extreme poverty. But it is also a way to offer hope, hope which is a light that is cast upon our lives, which reaches into our hearts and never leaves, and which dazzles the life of humanity.

Learning to hope

Thanks to hope, we are able to believe that poverty is not inevitable, that it can be overcome, and that it is an error of humanity, since it is by definition inhuman. It is anti-humanity. We really believe that all people

can work together to overcome poverty – for that is what hope is – that we will be able to eradicate it and that all people, starting from the poorest people, will be able to work to overcome it.

They will not destroy it in the same way as we would. Let's not be mistaken: they will find their own special, unique way to proclaim their love, their liberty, their truth, their equality, and their life and death.

There is an entire philosophy that will emerge and is already emerging, springing up from people of the Fourth World. It enables us to follow the paths they have taken and gives us shining beacons of knowledge because they can teach us about hope, about the future, about what is to come, and about the society we can create with our own two hands. Our own hands.

Our aim is to shape hearts and minds and enable people of the Fourth World themselves to become architects of the eradication of extreme poverty, of their own poverty, and the poverty of all humanity. But also, to shape everyone to be open to love.

No human being should be a stranger on this earth. No human being should live in fear. And no human being should be considered worthless. We should constantly remind ourselves of this. When we enter a poverty-stricken neighbourhood, we should always ask ourselves: "When I leave here, will the children be less estranged? Will they be less afraid? Will they feel more useful?"

And then, at that moment, we will open the path to hope and love.