

***POVERTY ALLEVIATION THROUGH EDUCATION AND  
SUMMER SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM IN CHINA***

**Program Development and Consortium Formation Meeting  
Wang Center, Pacific Lutheran University  
November 30, 2006**

**Ron Moffatt's Opening Address**

Good morning and welcome. I'm delighted to see each of you at this table. Your presence here tells me a lot about you: first, you are seriously concerned about poverty; second, you believe you can do something about it; and third, you are willing to commit your time, energy, talents and resources to support Peter and Grace's vision of Poverty Alleviation Through Education. Well, I'm pleased to confirm, in case there was any doubt, that all of us are in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. There's certainly lots to do, so let's roll up our sleeves and get started.

Even though we come from many diverse origins, each of us brings to this table the same heart space that promises a better tomorrow, a promise that awakens us each morning, lifts us from our field of dreams, and compels us forward in countless acts of faith. Poverty Alleviation Through Education is that promise; Peter and Grace are the visionaries who nurture that heart space; and all of us are the faithful actors. I feel blessed to be in the midst of so much hope, conviction and loving kindness. Thank you all for being part of this historic moment as we take our next steps in building that better world we all dream about. Thank you Peter and Grace for shining your light on the path ahead. And with your indulgence, I would like to briefly share a few reflections on where that path might take us.

I first glimpsed the path some 34 years ago in a Kenyan village called Tumutumu when I stood in a thatched hut called a classroom, looked about for books and desks that did not exist, confronted scores of friendly, hungry, penetrating eyes, and slowly began the process of learning how to see what life looks like from non-western, non-privileged perspectives. I lived in East Africa as a volunteer teacher, writer and neophyte global nomad for two years and I doubt any period in my life has had a more profound impact on shaping my worldview or directing my moral compass. A door opened and a new consciousness began transforming my inner landscape in ways that still resonate today, fueling a lifelong quest for creating greater compassion and justice in a world desperately needing more of both.

And now, as I look around and see such accomplished fellow dreamers and believers and doers gathered together to actualize the promise of Poverty Alleviation Through Education, I feel compelled to offer one more act of faith - a somber homily with a hopeful ending.

As veteran international educators, no one knows better than you how rapidly our world is changing and how profoundly those changes impact our lives on a moment-to-moment basis. Because we work in a field so inextricably connected to the relentless advance of globalization, change is our constant companion, and coping with change becomes our collective challenge. As those changes grow increasingly interconnected across cultures, they become increasingly confounding, and the issues that ensue can assume staggering proportions that soon boggle the mind, or jar the soul. And from an ever growing menu of global issues that imperil our collective future, three "synapse rattlers" top my richter scale of conundrums that we, as cohabitants of our Earth community, can no longer afford to avoid:

First, what hope for justice can we find in a world where half the population - nearly three billion people - live on less than two dollars a day, and half of those live on less than \$1 a day? What does justice mean when the combined wealth of the world's 712 billionaires exceeds the combined gross domestic product of the world's 150 poorest countries?

Second, what hope for peace can we find in a world where global military spending exceeds \$980 billion annually? What does peace mean when the world's largest arms dealer accounts for more than half of that amount by operating 702 bases in 131 countries, plus another 6,000+ installations in a land called home?

And third, what hope for sustainability can we find in a world where the race to the bottom is driven by economic policies that champion unlimited growth, induce hyper consumption and accelerate environmental devastation? What does sustainability mean when the triumph of blind greed over clear wisdom allows the world's most powerful politicians to debunk global warming in favor of energy policies that promote more carbon emissions and ensure the advent of Apocalypse now?

These are the three moral imperatives of our times – alleviating poverty, resolving conflicts non-violently, and adopting sustainable life-styles - and how well we respond as a global community to these challenges in the next five-to-ten years could change the future of our planet more profoundly than any other period in history. Preserving the planet for our children and grandchildren speaks to our deepest aspirations, no matter what culture, religion, or ideology we embrace or espouse. As the daunting social, political, and environmental costs of globalization continue to escalate and imperil our collective survival, we must learn how to foster and connect organizations and communities that generate global solutions to global problems.

The hopeful promise of such a global community is its capacity to connect people and institutions in collaborations that transcend the myopic legacies of competing forces advancing short-term self-interests. Imagine for a moment, a connected civil society that prepares and inspires a whole new generation of global citizens who look at global issues systemically and envision new paradigms that foster synergistic and holistic approaches to creating sustainable environments and human security for all.

As international educators shaping our global future, we share a compelling responsibility and a unique power to envision possibilities commensurate with the challenges we face. We must act now to foster and connect individuals, organizations and local communities all around the world to create a more just, more compassionate and more sustainable world for all. Therein lies our hope for the future, and should we ever find that hope, holding on to it will mean that the stone in our heart dissolves, and we can take heart once more. And that heart space is what keeps alive the promise of Poverty Alleviation Through Education.

And finally - for those, like me, who may sometimes wonder - how can we possibly do this, how can one person, or one organization, or one community, possibly make a difference with such huge issues on a global scale, allow me to close with a story that comes from the heart of Africa, home to some of the most impoverished, desolate communities on our planet.

I first heard this story last May when I enjoyed the good fortune of introducing Wangari Maathai to the thousands of NAFSAns who had gathered in Montreal for our annual conference. I'm sure many of you know Professor Maathai as the recipient of the 2004 Noble Peace Prize for her contributions to sustainable development, democracy and peace. She was honored for her work as founder of the Greenbelt Movement, an organization that has planted over 30 million trees across Kenya through a community network connecting over 600 local nurseries.

It's interesting to note that the very first tree Wangari Maathai planted was in Tumutumu in 1977, just a few steps from the classroom path that launched my journey just a few years earlier. Here is the story she shared with us in Montreal.

One day a terrible fire broke out in a forest - a huge woodlands was suddenly engulfed by a raging wild fire. Frightened, all the animals fled their homes and ran out of the forest. As they came to the edge of a stream they stopped to watch the fire and they were feeling very discouraged and powerless. They were all bemoaning the destruction of their homes. Every one of them thought there was nothing they could do about the fire, except for one little hummingbird.

This particular hummingbird decided it would do something. It swooped into the stream and picked up some drops of water and went into the forest and put it on the fire. Then it went back to the stream and did it again, and it kept going back, again and again and again.

All the other animals watched in disbelief; some tried to discourage the hummingbird with comments like, "Don't bother, it is too much, you are too little, your wings will burn, your beak is tiny, it's only a drop, you can't put out this fire."

And as the animals stood around disparaging the little bird's efforts, the bird noticed how hopeless and forlorn they looked. Then one of the animals shouted out and challenged the hummingbird in a mocking voice, "What do you think you are doing?" And the hummingbird, without wasting time or losing a beat, looked back and said, "I am doing what I can."

Like the hummingbird, we each must do what we can.

Imagine if Poverty Alleviation Through Education, and other like-minded, open-hearted, and common-spirited organizations, put 6 billion drops of water on the fire every minute of every day.

Imagine what we could do to build that better world we all dream about.

Imagine!

Now let's get busy and put out the poverty fire.

Thank you.