

Indigenous Participation in Dialogues on Economic Reform  
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In my country, the United States, we focus on life here and now, in this living adult generation, and how things might be materially better for us today. None of this putting off to the afterlife of the better circumstances we could create and enjoy right now. Without thinking about it, we disappear from the life of our feelings the generations that went before us and the generations coming after us. I suppose in a way we consider ourselves to be shaking off the shackles of old ways, old obligations, old attachments that threaten to hold us in bondage, locked in the old life that kept ordinary people living lives of limited means, ambitions, sense of their own talents and feel for the horizons of life. We believe our thinking is empowered by ignoring the constraints of old proprieties.

And yet what if this concentration on the living generation as the only generation on our policy and planning horizon does more than free us to imagine and embark on new possibilities? What if it also makes us less able to effectively take care with our own lives and our own institutions here and now? What if this shucking off of the lives that were, and the lives that will be, cripples our feel for our own lives, for what really matters to us, here in our time?

Perhaps the most important gift of life's globalization is that we can listen to how other peoples organize their thoughts about life, who matters, what matters and why. We can discover what their feel for life brings into sharp focus for them. We can ask whether, when their sense of the landscape of life differs from ours,

there is something they notice that could be helpful to us. However, there is a group of peoples many countries would hesitate to turn to for such a dialogue, namely the ethnic groups, the indigenous peoples, the first nations that exist within their borders and who have lost their autonomy to the government of the country itself. In my own country we would not think to turn to the indigenous peoples within our borders for a dialogue of civilizations within which to reconsider our own approach to matters such as global economic reform, and yet I would suggest this could be very helpful to us.

Many first nations view themselves as one link in a chain of generations running back in time to their ancestors and forward in time to generations yet to be born. They have a feel for those generations, past and to come, as present in their lives right now. They have a sense of obligations and care extending both back in time and forward. It is not just the present generation that they keep in mind. Right relationships must be maintained with those who have gone before and those who will come after.

Those who went before left us the world we inherited, while those who follow will inherit the world we leave to be theirs. What I want to suggest is that by jettisoning a feel for the relationships we have with these generations, we lose some of our feel for our own lives and our own context as well. This makes it more difficult to understand the choices confronting us when we embark on global discussions about things like economic reform.

Suppose for a moment there might be something to this thought..

## I. The Generations Following Us

Right relation to those who come after us means recognizing that late teen and early adult years are times for the young to enter the adult world. It's important to them that they enter that world with a positive expectation that there will be work for them, jobs -- that they are needed and they will be able to make lives they treasure. A feel for *their* situation, their hopes and their need to be needed, would move us to be determined to provide them with exactly that situation. And that determination in turn would alter the focus of global discussion about economic reform from the projects that result from tending mostly to profit-maximization.

In the statistics I've come across, there are 1.2 billion people on the planet today between the ages of 10 and 19. They will shortly be, or already are, landing on the shores of the adult world needing to know they are needed, needing to know the roles they'll be playing as adults in that world, needing to know it's going to go well even if they don't know all the particulars. Their energy, their focus, their desires to make a worthy and good life, their talents and skills and thinking and observing, all must count for something, must count for a lot in fact, must count enough to add up to a life they are grateful to be living, proud of, happy with. And here we are, the adults of the adult world, with the US and the Eurozone worrying everyone that the entire global economic system may seize up, contract still more sharply, shed hundreds of millions more of jobs, and be unable to get going again for decades. Where are the jobs now, let alone tomorrow when there will be more job-seekers than today?

At the center, exacerbating the weaknesses of this system, is the push for profit-maximization, which is quite different from focusing on these 1.2 billion young people and the very large question: What exactly are we going to need them to be doing? What do we adults need their energies and their talents for? What tasks do we need them to join us in shouldering, as fellow adults? Worrying about what will happen to us is important, but just worrying about that seems oddly to have the effect of constricting our faith in our creativity to make the future work out well. Turning loose our best desires for *their* lives may free up the creativity we need, not to mention expansive hopefulness in our own spirits. Caring more for others than we have can do wonders for the state of our own happiness in life.

So here's the problem the young bring to us: Clearly we need some of them, maybe even many of them, but all of them? Can we welcome all of this generation into adulthood, really welcome them, bring them in with encouragement, guidance, gladness that they've arrived, not just as a category but each one as a person with his or her own uniqueness, taking care to see to it that they all land on their feet and land well? All of them?

Behind them are another 1.2 billion children between the moment of birth and the age of nine. Altogether that's 2.4 billion young people globally who are going to need to make good adult lives, who will need to labor and be paid for it to the point where they are happy about the lives they make, the homes they make for themselves, the homes that are not just shelters from the elements but shelters for love and family life and friendships. What are these young people going to be needed for, and how will they be paid enough for doing it?

We can do far better with economic reform if we focus less on making the highest possible amounts of money for ourselves or the enterprises we work for, and more on the hold on our hearts of these young people who are about to arrive in our adult world and need to discover they can play good roles in it -- which requires us to figure out how global economic life is going to work.

They bring additional challenges as well. They need to feel that the adult world they are entering, including the economic world, is a world worthy of their esteem, a world that does justice to their enthusiasm and hopes, a world in which they can live worthy lives, a world in which all this is materially supported by being able to labor at things that genuinely contribute to the lives of others and for which they are rightly paid well enough to make materially comfortable, interesting, heart-warming, spirit-maturing lives. And, more and more, as the globally inter-netted-generation, they need this to work for all the young people, all around the world. They need this world to be good for everyone involved, not just for themselves.

So how do we, in our generation, forge such an inheritance for them to step into? We would do better by way of economic reform if we focus on that as the primary task that concerns us, rather than on profit-maximization. To do this means to open our hearts and our welcoming to them, to all those children and teens we do not personally know but whose life situation we can grasp if we allow ourselves to have a feel for their lives and for our own lives when we were at that stage of life.

That is the outside of the challenge the generations to come pose to us adults. There is an inside story as well. Each of them must have a feel for life, for his or her

own life and for the lives of others, a feel for life that makes it possible for them to enter into the roles they will play in their time and do good rather than harm. They must not step into this world having already stepped outside of their own spirits, hearts, life contexts, their relationships with those who have gone before them, including us, and those who surround them and those that will in turn follow them.

Without that anchor in the feel for their own lives and the lives of the others, the feel that exists in their hearts, in their spirits, in their bodies as well as the insights in their minds, how will they as a generation be able to take up the still larger challenge that fate has chosen for them, as for us, the challenge of making global life something better than it has been, something that works well for all seven billion of us? How will they, any more than we, take up the challenge of envisioning this global way of life that none of us has ever encountered?

How will they have a feel for creating together a global life they all will love well enough to tend with care, cherish and gladly hand on to the generations that will follow them, if we do not help them listen quietly within, stay centered in their own feel for life rather than stepping out of the flow of the generations as so many of us have. It's important they do not dislocate themselves, losing track of their own feel for the things that really matter in life.

They need us to focus on providing a world of work and reward into which they can enter. They need us to encourage the security that comes at that age only with knowing you will be needed and valuable and rewarded and empowered to make the good adult life that stirs like an intoxicating dream inside you at that age. They need our best efforts to listen for the voice of spirit and heart and love and

readiness to work, that voice that can so easily be misheard or silenced, and to help them grow centered and on the path to their own wisdom about life.

Yet we ourselves, so many of us, are not so wise, not so at home in our own lives, in our own hearts and spirits and relationships. Many of us have not been the recipients of the mentoring into real life that they need from us. Many of us have never even witnessed it. We don't know the words, we don't have a feel for that kind of relationship. We fumble, overdo it, grow silent and withdrawn, and yet we must try rather than be casual and inattentive. *They need us!*

Fortunately there are cultures where this kind of mentoring is more common. Part of the beauty of life's globalization is that we can borrow such ways from those who are already better at something like this than we are. It's not that all indigenous peoples have such ways, but many do. We should be thankful for the opportunity to speak with them and learn how better to care for the young everywhere.

## II. Taking Care with Our Inheritance

Those who have gone before us have left us the economic world we inherited. Hunter gatherers left the world of Nature more or less intact, with its resources and its dangers. Those who undertook the agricultural revolution left us both the problems and the benefits of division of labor, along with all that became possible because a percentage of people were freed from gathering food. Those who created the industrial revolution substantially altered the material conditions of life and the length of our lives. There are benefits we enjoy from each. In regard to

economic life, these are some of the major contributions of those who have gone before us.

Whether those “ancestors” had us in mind or not, whether they also thought of their struggles to make life better as gifts they were making for their children and grandchildren, and ultimately for us and those who come after us, their labors nonetheless created our inheritance. The thing is we don’t take that inheritance all that seriously; we’re preoccupied with what we could do better.

Suppose we were to regard the inheritance left to us as more than a collection of things lying around for our use. What if we were to feel that affection for it that grows out of its connection to our grandparents, and their grandparents, all the way back? A feeling of regard, respect and appreciation weaves a kind of affection for the world left for us as tokens of their presence, imprints of their touch, their thoughts, their labors, their inventiveness. I sometimes think such respect goes hand in hand with respect for ourselves; we are part of a lineage – disrespect that and what is it we make of ourselves as their descendants?

That respect also goes hand in hand with how we engage the world they’ve touched and shaped. Being able to feel gratitude for what’s been handed on goes together with a desire to treat the inheritance given to us with some measure of reverence and care -- precisely the feelings we hyper-moderns shut out from consciousness for fear they’ll get in the way of innovation. The irony is that shutting out reverence for ancestors is interwoven with shutting our reverence for the realities that are the context of our own lives. In its place we easily develop a casual attitude toward economic reality, just as we take a casual attitude toward those who

gave us the economic world to work with. This casual attitude toward on-the-ground economic realities in the name of endless, highly-exciting innovations in the financial sector has made economic life more fragile rather than less. The policies and practices that casualness fostered have left us more vulnerable, and more at risk of living through times in which it is extremely difficult to make any kind of living. To be inattentive is to leave ourselves in for unpleasant surprises of our own making.

What if those small cultures that are mindful of their ancestors in a positive way understood something we need to understand if we're to reform our economic practices to make economic life more resilient, more predictably good, more reliable? Maybe abstracting the economic life we have from our relationships with those who went before us diminishes our capacity for caring about real economic life and increases the risk that we can get lost in hyper-abstract investment "products" and the pursuit of numbers as if that made food better, water purer, the sky cleaner, love and the savoring of daily life easier, or our densely-networked global economic life richer, more reliable, less vulnerable.

The attitude we take toward the economic tools surrounding us determines how well we use them to make something worthwhile in our day. Reverence and gratitude go hand in hand with taking care, and we do need to take good care with the "revolutions" bequeathed to us. If you value life's globalization, for instance, you must value the two major technologies on which it rests: the global-reach transportation and communications systems that industrialization made possible. It makes sense to focus on ways in which they are vulnerable and invest in protecting

their future because their future is the foundation of the future we want to keep intact for ourselves.

To cut to the chase, when oil runs out, how exactly will planes fly? We are in need of a transportation revolution just to preserve what industrialized life handed on to us, because the stuff that made that gift work won't be around. This should be a central piece of concerted global investment in tomorrow. The same holds for everything in industrialization that depends on petrochemicals; all of it will disappear. What will take its place? And which of those disappearances won't really make much difference? Which do we really need to attend to? A globalized future hinges on some kind of global-reach, rapid transportation system, but what will it be? And what's the minimum that's going to be required to keep our global communications infra-structure up and running, no matter the conditions ahead?

The agricultural revolution rests on soil and water and growing season. Its gifts survive only so long as soil survives, soil that is alive and thriving and capable of supporting the particular kinds of life we look to it for. Casualness views soil as dirt, end of story. Those who are attentive to soil know that is it rich in life, and that the life going on in the soil makes it the rich ground for growing the grains, vegetables and fruits we live on. Just as oil will disappear, soil can disappear – and regularly does in the process of desertification. So how do we tend and grow more soil? Tending that resource grows the basis for our lives. That's what taking care with life entails. It's part of the realism, the refocusing on what matters, that a measure of non-casual reverence makes possible.

Food production rests on fresh water, and we have been using fresh water faster than it is replenished. Casualness about water won't come to feel alarmed until the "food bubble" collapses. Reverence and appreciation for what has been left to us means understanding the role of water in our lives. Real concern for the water that makes agriculture thrive, season after season, is all part of a larger way of feeling in this life, the feel of attentiveness and concern and affection for all that sustains life. Global economic reform, rooted in that feel for reality and how it weaves into our lives, would concentrate on how best to keep agriculture alive, which means taking care of water and soil. Many first nations have a reverence for and love of the real world strong enough to take care of it, when they are not kept from doing so. Global economic reform has not been so good at this challenge, prey as it has been to soaring so far into abstract financial tools that all sight is lost of our earth-bound lives, consigning those lives to whatever is left over after our minds have played the games we chose to play "because we can."

Water, like the large fish in the sea and the skies overhead, is part of the world given to us by nature, along with the diversity of food sources known to many hunter-gatherers. Because of our numbers we are "eating down" that world faster than it can replenish itself. We are losing the natural world left us by the hunter-gatherers who knew no better than to leave that world intact for us.

On the one hand more than a few countries consist of tens of millions, hundreds of millions, even a billion people, and so it has become incumbent upon us to see the Earth through the lens of efficiencies of scale. That lens that is the logistical mind at work produces vast outputs, and yet these are not the eyes of

hearts that see the earth with affection, fondness, rich in memories and dreams. These are not the eyes that linger in the sensory moment, along with our other senses, savoring earth-bound experiences that are laden with hints of imagination and feeling. These are not the eyes that will know love affairs with this Earthly home. Nor, ironically, are they eyes that see vulnerability coming.

The mind that sees only efficiencies of scale and logistics lacks reverence, and yet reverence by itself can lack the daring that undergirds much of innovation. That's the tension we face. On the one hand, who says the world must remain exactly as it was handed on to us? Often we could use something better, and we can use what is at hand in new ways so we can make life better. And yet often we overdo it, making life worse. Is love for the Earth and reverence for our inheritance part of being in love with the world and with our own lives? Or part of constricting our creativity and so loving ourselves less? A very large question for global conversations about life and about economic reform, one perhaps best understood paradoxically in that both views can be helpful – or injurious.

We have, in my country and not only my country, thrown ourselves off balance by emphasizing innovation without an anchoring feel for our inheritance and a corresponding attitude of concerted working together to see that our rewards and sanctions protect and keep the gifts of our ancestors alive and thriving.

This is not just a matter of learning a different set of words and thoughts. It's a matter of what we feel in our hearts and spirits as we engage the material world we live in. The indigenous teaching is that this is a matter of deep feeling for water, for sky, for soil, for the life around us -- and now also for the connections with each

other that our technologies make possible, the gift our contemporaries have created for us. Casual inattentiveness endangers the gifts that sustain life and its quality, leaving us vulnerable to ideas and practices that damage our future and erode life's quality here and now. We are less able to feel the pleasures and joys of life, the riches of spirit, heart, senses and muscles, and mind -- because we have stepped outside of our feel for our relationships with those who have gone before us and the world as our inheritance from them. And so we have stepped out of our ability to feel many other things as well. By stepping out of reverence, gratitude and care, we have lost a feel for how to guard and guide our own lives effectively. We did not expect that to be the result of tuning out those who have gone before, but there it is. That would be the teaching if we were to listen.

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The idea that we can learn something from indigenous first nations by way of wisdom is a bit of a jolt for us in the modern world, but there it is. If we embark on globalization as the path of learning how better to do humanness, learning from and with each other, and learning together, then why not recognize that indigenous cultural emphasis on right generational relationships can alter our feel for life and for global economic living. It can alter our feel for the world we have inherited, enabling us to better tend that world, and can alter our feel for the generations growing up all around us and our sense of the place their developmental needs should rightly have in our global economic reforms.

Why not believe that a feel for our place in the generations no longer here and the generations not quite here might give us a more sure-footed feel for our

own lives, our own life contexts, and so enlarge the global discussion of economic reform and its central concerns? Might this not result in positive consequences for resources and happiness? Realizing small cultures can offer wisdom bearing on re-organizing postmodern economic life is a very big step for the modern world. It is a big step into the role of being equal partners with all the world's peoples in the task that is larger than any one people can sort out on its own, the challenge of making global life better for everyone -- together. The wisdom to do this can only emerge through globally inclusive dialogues in which we learn to take seriously matters that we, in any one culture, routinely overlook. Learning with and from each other, however, we can manage to all be in on this great step forward into the future *together*. Therein lies the promise that we really can make today's world into a global life we all treasure.