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Closing the Gap of Dignity

By Shulamith Koenig, People’s Decade for Human Rights Education

My life is the evolution of purpose and often-uncontrolled commitment to join in transforming the world. Isaiah is my prophet, Martin Buber is my teacher, Eleanor Roosevelt is my hero, and Nelson Mandela is my idol; and the thousands of people I met in the last twenty-five years in more than sixty countries are my true guides, not to mention my family and friends and those who have joined me, caused and supported my evolution throughout my life…--As was said more than 1500 years ago, with great insight by Rabbi Ben Zuma, who was quoted in the biblical Chapters of the Fathers: *Who is the wise person who learned from everyone? – As was stated: from all my students I have gained wisdom.*

In this book that calls on pulling together the aggregate of insights, knowledge, and praxis gained during the many years of commitment and dedication of human rights educators, I appeal to you, the reader, to contemplate and take action to close the gap of dignity…--to add a missing link to your efforts now and in the future. I believe it to be an imperative to: (a) introduce throughout the world an ongoing process of learning human rights as a way of life, (b) integrate such “Learning” throughout all sectors of civil society, and (c) offer it as a “New” re-imagined and re-crafted guiding worldview. Human Rights Education (HRE) does not reach 95% of humanity, the women, men, youth, and children ­­– those who need to know and own human rights to meaningfully transform their lives. I hope that my humble contributions in the coming pages will inspire some of you to make a promise to reach those left behind in your current HRE efforts. It is urgent that all of us join in a world movement of MENTORS, to encourage and facilitate such learning in every community around the globe. Let us not “educate” or “inform” anyone, but with the people in their communities design ways and means that will secure a process whereby all people, wherever and whoever they are, will learn, know, and own human rights, discovering how it is relevant to their daily lives, to the future of their families, communities, and humanity as a whole. Simply, believe that people should empower themselves by making their choices drawn from the knowledge stored in the comprehensive human rights framework as a way life. We, all of us, need to hold in our hands a tool to construct a powerful strategy for economic, societal, and human development. We can do it!! – I have been trying for all my life through the many endeavors I chose to engage with about which I was asked to write.

In our fast moving, tumultuous lives, much of it imposed on us with the many guided today by social networking, we can search and find moments of unexpected transcendence that can liberate and inspire new ideas – the gift of real, meaningful hope that leads to action. Capturing these magical moments – as I always try – can move us to re-envision our lives as one vibrant link in the chain of humanity’s expectations for dignity, equality, and life void of all forms of discrimination. Such a journey is one of social responsibility reinforced through integration of the learning of human rights that leads to action. As the learners join in the eradication of poverty and liberate themselves from violence,…--a “new political culture based on human rights” starts emerging, as called for by Nelson Mandela, where the learners chart and own their future guided by the holistic vision and practical mission of human rights as a way of life.

Such an extraordinary moment in time took place in 1948 when Eleanor Roosevelt, joined by men and women from more than eighty countries, gave the world the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a “gift” meant to remove the chains of colonialism and to *never again* have humanity experience genocide. The UDHR delivers a holistic worldview, a space to belong in dignity in community with the “other,” as said by Franklin D. Roosevelt: *Freedom from fear and freedom from want*. Yet it is very sad! Most of the people around the worlds know little about it.

Every year on the tenth of December and every day, we must continue to ask: How does the meaning of human rights add to our daily lives and to the lives of people in our community? ...--Can human rights become the guiding light for crafting a better world by all for all? And if so, why are there so few of us who know the meaning of human rights as a way of life? – What can we do about it? ‑– This has been my search for the last twenty-five years.

We must note that transcendence did not end with the event of the UDHR. It gave the United Nations its overarching purpose and foundation that forcefully radiated the vision for economic and social justice. It was translated by Member States into human rights’ norms and standards that are relevant to the lives of all women and men, youth and children in all places of all cultures and religions. They are articulated in the two Covenants on political, civil, economic, social, and cultural human rights and the Conventions on the elimination of racism; the human rights of women and of children; and recently, of indigenous people, people with disabilities, and soon of migrants, the elderly, and more to come. This is an overarching powerful framework that more than 150 countries of 192 UN Members have ratified – the other forty-two have ratified a few. Ratification means synchronizing the laws of the specific state with the very specific human rights norms and standards. Again: very few people in each of the 192 countries know them to request that indeed these Covenants and convention – even with the reservation ­become the law of the land and furthermore, be able to claim them. So please do tell, what are most human rights educators doing about the here and now, for forceful community action?? This is not blame – this is just a call to bring about soul-searching, for change to close the gap of dignity.

Case in point: Bangladesh, a Muslim country, upon ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) made five reservations out of the sixteen articles; these five articles were considered by religious leaders to contradict Muslim laws. A movement of women in the cities and around the countryside introduced discussions and learnings that examined the meaning of CEDAW to the lives of women in Bangladesh, analyzing the consequences of these reservations to their lives. As a result of ongoing learning, reflecting, and lobbying through the democratic political system, women were successful in having their government eliminating three reservations. The pressure by and for women is still mounting to eliminate the other two. Women are demanding to be treated as full human beings!

We all know but always must remember that these carefully developed human rights instruments attempt, at least officially, to move humanity from the oppression of vertical and hierarchical institutions to newly constructed horizontal spaces where all people can move freely, able to make horizontal creative choices in and for their lives…--Where all people with new insight can walk, without or with partners of their choice, towards the horizon that they have selected. Many know this intuitively, yet so few know about human rights as a way to be with one another or how to integrate them into their lives. I made it my task with those who joined our organization to move this sense of decency from intuition to putting in the hands of people the power of human rights.

It is painful and a wonder to me why many working to change the world do not use this powerful tool for action. Is it because many international human rights organizations and human rights educators focus mostly on violation and do not bring a comprehensive message to all of us who yearn to realize our hopes and expectations imbedded in the rich, invigorating, and fully comprehensive human rights agenda? (Indeed, patriarchy and economic colonialism are alive and thriving. Genocide did not vanish even though as we never stop to evoke historic memory.) There is much to be cynical about, including a process of learning human rights as a way of life where immediate “outcomes” cannot be recorded. This fortunately does not prevent me from being a fanatic…--On the contrary! I continue to flag the imperative…--of introducing and facilitating, in as many places as we can reach, a never ending, ongoing process for all to learn and know human rights as a vital and viable inevitability for people’s lives.

As I continue to ponder, I know that such efforts must go beyond time-bound pedagogy, lesson plans, and methodologies applied in the form of “education” and “information.” We need to engage the communities in a dialogue about the meaning of human rights in their past, present, and future…-- Have them get in touch with an inspiring world view for which we have no other option. (In Argentina during an intensive, very lively discussion with police cadets conducted by Susana Chiarotti, one of the cadets stood up and spoke about his human rights being violated; then the chief of police, who came to observe the “happenings,” interrupted the cadet and ordered him to sit down. The cadet turned around, faced the chief and said: *I have learned here that we all have human rights to express ourselves freely. I will therefore not sit down before I finish my complaint*. After the session, Susana believed that she would never be allowed to hold another session with the police. When she returned to her office, a call came from the chief of police: *Please –* he said *– find time to hold such learning sessions with the entire police force in the region*. Visiting Rosario, I was told by the director of the police academy: *We have no other option but human rights*, which has become my mantra ever since.)

In our work we find it so gratifying and often amazing how people develop systemic analysis when introduced to the holistic human rights agenda, holding in it the many details that can step-by-step transform their lives. People spontaneously decipher between cause and effect as they hold honest, often brave, discussions between women and men about patriarchy as a major cause that underlies human rights violations. Thereof, critical thinking flourishes – setting the way for sustained realization of human rights. (I recall, with much delight, the young man from a small village near the City of Kai, the first human rights city in Mali. He introduced himself as the oldest son of the local religious leader. Amidst the second week of discussions on the meaning of human rights as a way of life, he called me out of the room to let me know in secret that as a result of thinking about what he has learned, he told his father that his mind was made up to marry only one woman. It was his personal conclusion. We in no way spoke of polygamy or even hinted at it. To me it was a wonderful gift for hard work!)

The French philosopher Levinas wrote: *If one person was missing from the world, the absolute truth would be different*. Allow me to look up with humility at tall trees such as Levinas and say: *If one person was missing from the world, human rights would be different*. Human Rights are the living TRUTH that all must know. It is ever evolving. It is ever discovering and redefining our being in the world in equality and without discrimination. We each bring with us the moment of transcendence and uniqueness-of-being for which human rights was created. We must learn to act with Human Rights as a living organism, indivisible, interconnected, and interrelated. And ALL the people must know them! The discovery of human rights as a way of life through learning and dialogue at the community level brings moments of transcendence, moments of trust that carry in them respect and acceptance of others as full human beings.

Young people around the world are taking to the streets and squares, challenging the status quo as young people have always done. The significant difference today is the genuine fear about limited opportunities to a generation that will be worse off than their parents. Governments and NGOs decades ago designed systems to deal with post- Second World War generations. Today these are ill equipped to address the needs of seven billion people, with more than 45% being under twenty-five years old. Allow me to repeat: *It is obvious that we need to re-learn, re-imagine, and re-craft a new vision that can meet the needs of today towards a better tomorrow.* The human rights framework, the learning in communities that human rights stands to contribute to restructuring our lives will unfold a new thinking of who we are in the world with others and hopefully act upon it. This is where our energies are called for.

In many countries the university campus, always a hot spot for protest and a base for generational change, is the ideal place to organize corps of faculty and students that will together investigate how to introduce a new way of viewing the world, learning and integrating human rights as an integral part of daily life. Thus the work undertaken by human rights educators, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights and UNESCO, must not be conceived and designed as “training” and/or time bound studies, but as an integrated process of ongoing learning in every academic discipline. By introducing into their immediate communities ongoing learning and dialogue, the university as a whole can become a pioneer in bringing forth a new vision of the UDHR*.*  This needs to be coupled with a well-designed cultural, religious strategic plan to ensure that within a given community every woman, man, youth, and child will know, claim, and be able to act upon human rights as an integral part of their daily life, enriching their cultures and religions with a new way to embrace their future. The question is how to develop a participatory, appraisal tool that helps people express their concerns and simultaneously makes them aware that they are linked to a global initiative/movement? How do we stand to motivate them to see that their concerns and lives are linked to others around the corner and around the globe? The idea is that everyone living on earth needs to know their human rights in order to claim their rightful place in the “household of humanity.”

I ask myself day in and day out: How do we achieve this most ambitious and necessary undertaking? Where do we begin the learning about human rights? In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, we have an answer. She said: *Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, closes to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet, they are the world of the individual person: The neighborhood he/she lives in; the school or college he/she attends; the factory, farm or office where he/she works.*

Human rights visionaries around the world have echoed these words in their call for men and women, youth and children to know, own, and claim their human rights. These women and men have understood Human Rights Learning (HRL) as a transformative process, one that awakens the consciousness to a new perspective, a different way of viewing the world, and charts their future. Eleanor Roosevelt refers to the transformation from within, thus, allowing people to see the relevance of human rights in their daily lives. This new perception is then carried out into the greater world where the “I” becomes the “WE” and the “WE” becomes “HUMANITY.”

I was asked to tell the story about my life that led me to making this commitment. So I will, with the hope that young people searching to make this a better world for all may find some parallels that will lead them to become “Mentors.” First allow me to describe what I mean when I speak of a MENTOR: It is a person, a woman or a man, who is capable of evoking critical thinking and systemic analysis about civil, cultural, economic, political, and social concerns with a gender perspective within a human rights framework that leads to action. It is a woman or a man who believes that all people have a deep sense of justice, dignity, and thus of human rights. It is a women or a man who believes that “human rights” is a universal worldview that transcends cultural and religious disagreements to render culture and religion a space in which we can live together. And most important it is a member of the community who does not teach but with the people creates an ongoing process of people interrogating the meaning of human rights to their lives, to know, own, and be guided by them.

My personal story and some varied narratives that, at the young age of eighty-two, keep me going to leave a legacy so that in five to ten years, all people learn and act upon human rights as a way of life that is moral, political, and protected by law. Using the short version of the UDHR (See end of this narrative) to start the mentoring, design and develop insight that lead to belonging in community in dignity with others.

I do not know what specific qualities make one a ceaseless human rights mentor. One who believes and acts with the conviction that there is no other option but for all to know and be guided by human rights as a way life? Well, having called myself a fanatic who repeats mantras, the keystone events throughout my life might explain my actions for the past twenty-five years.

At the age of two, I was told that my name, Shulamith, means a woman from Jerusalem, a woman of peace. (Later, I learned, it’s a name from the *Song of Songs of King Solomon*, a woman from – “Yeru-Shalem‑ and people will see fulfillment.) At the age of six, while complaining to my parents about the teacher who said that the Jews are the “Chosen People” and not my Arab friends, I was told, “Yes you are…--chosen for social responsibility.” At seven, I was writing poetry and teaching children of European refugees to read and write Hebrew. (At that age, I also remember a print of the *Praying Hands* by Durer hanging above my bed.) By the age of nine, I thought of myself as a child of the Holocaust; the Italians were bombing Tel Aviv and broken-up families of refugees from Europe were invited to live in our home. Then, at fourteen I joined the Underground; and at the age of sixteen, I instructed fifteen-year-olds how to be secret messengers against the British in the streets of Tel Aviv. In 1948 I joined the Israeli Army, and in 1949, as an officer and the women’s commander of Jerusalem area, I resigned my post in protest of having orthodox girls relieved from service in the army for no cause but merely because of being religious. (This was the beginning of the tragic manifestation that we see today of perpetrating injustice by religious groups in the illegal settlements, Apartheid, and the uprooting of hundreds people and thousands of old olive trees – an important historic symbol in the West Bank.)

At the age of twenty, I came to the USA to become an engineer, hoping in the future to be able chart a different journey for Israel, new Jews in our new country. As I was learning about the Salem Witch Trials in my introductory classes to the English language, I was meeting groups at Columbia University who called for a world government. At that time to make a living and to try to effect change, I gave speeches about “Integration and Discrimination in Israel” and “Sex and Femininity in the Israeli Army.” The Israeli Embassy did not like it. But I did not stop. I got married and had a son, divorced, remarried, and had two more sons. Back in Israel I joined Shulamith Aloni, the leader of the civil liberty movement and “Kol Koreh”: a voice calling from the desert! I assisted in developing the Alfred Adler Institute in Tel Aviv, where I have learned from the students of Adler much of what defines my commitments to human rights learning. I worked with Arab and Jews, learning together the meaning of civil rights to our combined lives…--Established “Peace Now” in our home in Tel Aviv, manufacturing water saving products in a factory in Jerusalem with Jerry, my wonderful husband, where we employed Arab women who came to work with chaperons …--Joined and organized the first Israeli-Palestinian dialogue in Washington D.C…--called a traitor in Israel for saying in a television interview that I will not have my sons fight unjust wars… -- never ending the search for justice. After seeing Israeli’s enlightened future falling apart around us and losing our sense of humor, realizing with great pain that we could not contribute any longer to stopping the endless vicious cycle of humiliation in the West Bank, we left Israel and came back to New York with the hope that we can find some ways to make some difference.

In retrospect these pivotal experiences generated my fanaticism and my commitment. Now I stand only to quote the following by Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara (December 21, 1949 – October 15, 1987): *It took the madmen/women of yesterday for us to act with extreme clarity today. You cannot achieve a fundamental change without a certain amount of madness.* I share this quote of “madness” to give you the reason why I have dedicated my life to try to move the world to learn human rights is as a way of life. Today, I reach out to young people to take over this legacy.

As we settled in the USA, I wrote several articles questioning if Israel can be both democratic and Jewish while calling and demonstrating to put a stop to house demolitions and land grabbing in the West Bank. On a spring day during a drive with my family along the Hudson River, we discussed the meaning of the only modern option we knew: democracy! A spark was ignited: *What if all people in the world knew human rights as a way of life? Wouldn’t democracy become the fulfillment of a holistic vision and mission that will create a new journey for humanity? Yes! –* The family agreed! Thereafter, for many days my husband and three sons encouraged me to use the energy I was endowed with and call for an international effort of human rights education. (To add to the story: the source of energy that drives me, as I was told, is as follows: I was born in Jerusalem on a Friday night, as the Sabbath entered the city of the prophets, during the longest day of the year, June 20, 1930.). Thus, PDHRE – People Decade for Human Rights Education was born, now PDHRE, People’s Movement for Human Rights Learning.

The twenty-five-year voyage started at the Center for Human Rights at the UN where I learned from a wise woman, Elsa Stamatopoulou, the meaning of human rights. In her office I discovered the many details of the Covenants, which are guided by a moral authority, derived from the covenant Abraham made to observe the sanctity of life, and Conventions, which are guided by political, civil, economic, social, and cultural concerns. Having been a socialist, I was taken aback by the obvious lack of understanding and very little effort being undertaken in the field to advance of economic, social, and cultural human rights. In 1990, with a grant from the Norwegian Development Corporation, PDHRE laid out a plan to reach thirty countries around the world to introduced civil society groups and organizations to the ESCR Covenant. From the outset I personally chose not to work with human rights organizations that centered at the time only on political and civil issues and looked at human rights as mostly a legal paradigm. I made this decision after having met Amnesty International in London, other human rights organizations, and those few who at the time worked as human rights educators. Recognizing that there is an absolute need for the Covenant to be introduced to and known by an array of civil society organization in every country in the world, I took another road. We looked for groups whose community work centered on issues such as labor, women, education, religion, health, housing, etc.—Identifying twenty-three such issues (See <http://pdhre.org/justice.html> “Call For Justice,” where human rights commitments and obligation to each of twenty-three issues and groups are detailed.) With the small amount sent to a development organization identified in each of thirty countries, we advised that they convene a two- to three-day retreat with local leaders working on these issues. They were instructed to identify five main overarching concerns in their community. Each of these five organizations were invited to write one page detailing their profile and the story that described their specific concerns and provide analysis, including the hopes and expectation for change. These five pages were given to a local human rights expert who was asked to prepare the first day’s learning and discussions why these are indeed human rights issues. The second and third days were designated to echo the first day where participants learned to connect their specific issues to human rights.

It was in Nairobi, Kenya at such a workshop that something happened that has guided PDHRE’s work ever since. There was a Kenyan development worker who devised a way to stop the burning of wood to cook food in the market place: she exchanged the wood for solar lenses. ( – even now it is very progressive…) When she heard about our initiative, she offered to hold such a meeting in Nairobi, but was told by the authorities that the meeting could not be held in the city. So she moved it to take place out of the city. As participants arrived at the meeting space, they noticed, and tried to ignore, a policeman who was already sitting in the back of the room. As the morning proceeding progressed and the expert very carefully wove the meaning of economic and social human rights as relevant to the five issues presented to him, the policeman rose suddenly to his feet and called out with excitement, “Stop it! Stop It!” All looked around, worried (These were bad days in Nairobi). The expert asked, “What have we done?” The policeman smiled and said softly, “If this is human rights, come and teach it in my village.”

This single statement became a major milestone that sets our commitment to this very day. With many colleagues around the world we never stop promoting and facilitating the integration of an ongoing process in the villages for all to learn, know, and own human rights in a new viable way to achieve sustainable change. At PDHRE we continue to answer this policeman’s request in every region around the world. We continue to facilitate learning with local community leaders to have them become mentors of human rights for people to internalize them as a way of life and to carry with pride the vision of Eleanor Roosevelt.

In Israel I was member of a committee created by our Prime Minster at the time, Rabin, to implement in Israel the Decade of Women, which, as we know, gave tremendous impetus and thrust forward to the issues of women and equality around the world. Telling my friend and colleague Robert Kesten about my decision to work at having all people know human rights and own them as their own, he suggested, “Why don’t you work with people at the UN to declare a Decade for Human Rights Education?” Indeed, I did.

In 1993 in Vienna, I approached single handedly (Forgive again the lack of humility) sixty UN missions, convincing them of the need to declare the UN Decade of Human Rights Education, which thereafter was called for in the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights. Then through the end of 1994 we worked feverishly with the support of civil society groups in Asia and others to put through a General Assembly Third Committee Resolution that set international public policy on HRE. (This was also a follow-up to the UNESCO 1990 event, organized at the time by Stephen Marks, who later with other members of our board offered Member State the language of the Resolution that set forth the essence and creativity for the Decade.) It was my “fault” calling it “education” rather than “learning.” I did not realize what we stood to lose. In my bad translation from Hebrew to English we lost the meaning of the word “learning,” which allowed the narrowing of the vision and mission of the Decade. The word “education” in many ways was a “trap,” since it engaged in this effort mostly teachers, experts, and students to teach and study human rights, mostly in schools and academic institutions. Indeed, it also reached local authorities and law enforcement agencies and informal education (Don’t misunderstand me, this is very, very important!! but hardly enough). Education of human rights uncovered human rights as a legal paradigm, mostly as a set of “norms and standards” in the relationships between the people and their governments; even though in a very precise language the resolution named many civil society development groups and organizations, calling on them to engage and integrate HRE in their work. Alas, it did not happen as we envisioned. The objectives and goals of the Decade were misunderstood, and HRE is still locked in chains as is manifested in the recent Human Rights Council’s Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training,

In the first four years of the Decade we organized several meetings with top leaders from around the world and were also active with the group that created Human Rights Education Associates. However, we were still not answering the call of Eleanor Roosevelt or the policeman from Nairobi.

In 1997 we facilitated with Susana Chiarotti (who complained that I dream and she has to work hard) the development in Rosario, Argentina, the first human rights city in the world. Staying true to our vision and mission, Susana invited 120 representatives of groups from around the city, called to sign a declaration of the city becoming a human rights city. In the audience were representatives of the Toba people –100,000 indigenous people in a city of one million, those who were isolated and marginalized in the city. At her insistence, they joined in the formation of a steering committee that planed the various campaigns. These were designed to introduce learnings throughout the neighborhoods for the purpose of engaging inhabitants in the planning and future development in the city – at one point quotations from the UDHR were printed on every bus ticket in the city.

Here, to further answer the request of Abraham Magendzo to contribute narratives about the “learning process,” allow me to share a story from the human rights city Rosario. The Civil Society Ad Hoc Steering Committee in Rosario after learning in depth about human rights had developed campaigns for members of the community to learn about the meaning of human rights to their lives. In this process they asked the various neighborhoods to report on violations and realization of human rights as identified by them. These guided to mapping the human rights in the city, which led to the development of alternative budgets presented to the city. At one of the Committee’s weekly meetings a group of Toba women told their painful story: When giving birth and crying out loud in pain, they were humiliated by nurses and doctors who told them: “Shut Up!” and “Stop having sex if you cannot stand the pain of giving birth.” These women, having learned that human rights celebrate dignity and respect, told the committee: *Our human rights are being violated*. The committee, many of whom were familiar with the Theater of the Oppressed, decided to call for a meeting at the public theater, inviting all the nurses and doctors who were free that evening. Many came as requested by the director of the city’s hospital who said, “After all, this is a human rights city.” On the stage several members of the community role-played in “The Scene in the Delivery Room.” A hush fell in the theater during the performance. Toba women sitting in the front row covered their faces in the memory of pain and insult. As the curtains closed, the Chief of the hospital walked over to the representatives of the Toba women and apologized loudly, saying earnestly, “Anyone, nurses or doctors, who continues to behave the way we just saw on this stage, will be instantly fired!” Within a few weeks, Susana introduced the learning of human rights at the medical school, which is now a required course throughout the medical school…-- Human rights learning as preventive medicine.

We have documented this and other very exciting innovations from around the world in a book called: *Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development (*See http://pdhre.org/Human\_Rights\_Cities\_Book.pdf).

Almost in every region around the world, as we facilitated this process, we kept hearing: “Come and teach it in my village,” and “There is no other option but human rights.” It is because of what we learned that we moved to speaking of learning rather than education; we realized it is an ongoing, necessary process to be integrated into the work of every segment of society, including local authorities and the private sector…--Human Rights Learning leads people to participate as equals, women and men alike, in the decision that determines their societal destiny.

In 2008 alongside the sixtieth anniversary of the UDHR, the “Elders” led by Nelson Mandela, sent out a clarion call proclaiming: “Every HUMAN has RIGHTS.” Recalling Voltaire, who was asked “What should we do about human rights?” – to which he answered, “Let the people know them.” – and having facilitated the learning and integration of human rights as a way of life in more than sixty countries for twenty-one years at the time of the time of the Elders’ call, I sent them a note saying, *But do the “humans” know them? Most do not!* …--It is therefore imperative to add to the Elders call, and be loud and clear: *And every human must learn, know them, and own them as a way of life!* It is essential that all people be guided in their day-to-day life by the knowledge they still need to gain, enabling women and men to work towards meaningful, sustainable economic and social transformation. We have no other option!

Having been in hundreds of communities around the world, facilitating dialogue and introduction to a process of learning about human rights as a way of life, I choose not to engage in the discourse about diversity and/or intercultural dialogue, neither about peace, not to speak of not calling our work human rights education, which it is not!! I believe that such discussions distract us from holding the necessary and essential conversations that can lead to the planning of meaningful ways and means to facilitate the learning of human rights as a way of life throughout the world. Such efforts, when implemented, will evoke a sense of ownership of human rights instead, put in the hands of the learner a powerful tool for positive action, enriching people’s ability to live with and within diverse cultures in trust and respect of the humanity of the other. This is not a mere dream. As people pursue equal participation in the political decision-making process, in the decision that determine their lives, women and men alike, they join in weaving a new foundation of equality for all and the elimination all forms of discrimination…--Basically, as already said, this is what human rights is all about.

The awareness of communities that all human rights concerns and effective movement towards the realization of human rights, – be it political, civil, economic, social, and cultural – are indivisible, interconnected, and interrelated, with a gender perspective, have people accept how we are all different from one another; yet, yearn to belong in community in dignity with others. Any place in the world, we each have different and diverse cultural affiliations and inclination and several personal identities, yet, we all belong to the same humanity bound by the vision and mission of human rights as a way of life. We may all have different interpretations of belonging and how we relate to subjective historic memories that frame our pride and uniqueness within our families, villages, towns, and cities, not to mention religious and national identities, yet, all must be bound and guided by the fully comprehensive human rights framework. We can all overcome these diversities and break through the vicious cycle of humiliation by assuring that every community in the world designs and adopts an ongoing learning process where the humanity of the other is at the center of such learning, to join in closing the vicious cycle of humiliation where people exchange their equality for survival. The litany of HRE, to which this book is devoted and with all good intentions, does not go fully this way. To have people discover that they have full ownership and that they are the bearers of these “commandments” are inalienable, must cautiously appraise what it means to their lives.

To move from theory to practice, it was quite evident to us when school children in Thies, Senegal, a community of 250,000 inhabitants being developed as a “human rights city,” learned that “education is human rights,” interconnected and interrelated to other concerns in their lives. They innocently asked: *If education is a human right, why do some of our next-door neighbors not go to school? Why are their human rights being denied? Who is denying their human rights?* They were told that the parents of these children did not register them at birth. Students between the ages of twelve and sixteen teamed up spontaneously. In three years, going from door to door, they registered 4,312 children. Simultaneously, they lobbied with the authorities to expand the capacity of their schools and add more teachers. (It is important to note that this success story encouraged UNICEF further to do same around Africa where fifty million children are not registered, – as said: **learn, know, own, plan, and act**.) When the efforts of registration was completed, the teams, who were energized by their accomplishment to bring human rights to their community, called on the neighborhoods to collect the garbage off the streets and move it to empty lots; they asked the mayor to create a garbage collection service as a human right to protect the city’s health. Visiting Theis I met the mayor and shared with him my mantra “There is no other option but human rights.” He called in his assistant and orders them to write it on the wall above his desk.

 In the village of Malikunda, Senegal, as a result of ongoing conversations about the meaning of human rights, men and women declared an end to female gentile cutting. At the celebration of this unique community decision, a brave old women, who did many of the cutting, stood on the stage declaring that she will never cut girls again as she was lamenting the past. The first girl in the village that was not cut was named by her mother “Sen Sen “– i.e. “human rights.” Learning human rights as relevant to the lives of children in Thies or to the future of the women and men of Malikunda, and now throughout Africa, handed them a powerful tool to overcome oppressions of all kinds, enriching their lives to never again – as already reiterated – barter their equality for mere survival.

In an introduction of the learning process in several communities, I recently launched a discussion about human rights as a HOME. When you are a child, “home” is the place where you feel safe “out of the rain,” protected from the burning sun, and loved. As you grow older home can be the memory of a lullaby, the stories you were told or overheard, the clothes you wear, the earth you toil, a book you read, the yearning for dignity, including the good or painful memories that instruct our daily lives…--in short, the world we live in and wish for to be able to claim our own. People learning about equal, horizontal choices of decency and acceptance, trust and respect as so well articulated in the holistic human rights framework and as we translate its meaning to our lives, we learn to walk towards a new horizon, to restore or build new homes, internalizing the human rights language as a path of freedom in our HOME.

The word “home” holds a whole universe of meanings. Basically it is a “space” where people can be free from fear and free from want and often a refuge from persecution. It is a “place,” a mindset, an insight to wisdom, paving the road for walking securely with the human rights language for our hopes to become a reality and sometimes even transcendence. Many of us hold onto painful histories, often current memories of being “evicted” and violated and/or evicting our enemies from their homes to secure ours: this is a path to mistaken freedom. Human rights offer a home where the dignity of all people is being celebrated, the ultimate habitat of and for humanity, where no one human right can violate another – as in Article 30 of the UDHR.

This may be seen as Utopia in a world – a home – that in sixty years, from 1950 to 2010, grew from two billion people to seven billion, all needing a home of their own. For all that it means. This is also a world where “social networking” undermines value systems, spreads contradictory definitions about decency and trust, and leads many aimlessly in many different directions where they feel anguish but don’t know how to relieve it.

These often-conflicting observations, lead us to follow Nelson Mandela and ask all to join in weaving a political movement that will carve a new future for humanity. In a Dalit village sharing with women that “food, education, health, housing, and work at livable wages are inalienable human rights,” they clapped their hands, danced, and repeated these five human rights imperatives as a mantra. When I asked with humor, “Why are you dancing?” They answered: *We thought the government is being nice to give it to us from time to time. Now we understand the meaning of human rights! It is ours to have!!*”

It encompasses it all…--Such a dance needs to be danced in every village.

 The development of a “political culture” is an ever evolving phenomenon of being in community with others…of belonging; of defining the other as being fully human; of choosing or having been born into a specific culture and/or religion; and most importantly, of creating human rights political movements. The price of bread is political. A human rights political culture holds in it a critic of the patriarchal system. A system that both women and men participate in that must be done with if the comprehensive vision and mission of human rights is to be realized. Women as well as men must fully recognize that patriarchy is a system where injustice is justice a system that allows imposed marriages and human-trafficking, the many forms of discrimination against women (just to expose the tip of the iceberg). Life IS political in all its forms. Human rights, as my friend Loretta Ross describes it and as was noted earlier, is political and moral protected by law. Understanding it as such, we can indeed create a movement that will transform the world to a political culture based on human rights.

Will it be overreaching or too ambitious if we call on every single civil society organization, all local authorities, and the private sector to integrate ongoing, never-ending process of dialogue, discussions, and learning about human rights as a way of life? Women, men, youth, and children empower themselves, moving from slavery to freedom, from self-righteousness to justice, and from charity to dignity.

Churchill said that democracy is not the best solution but we have no other. Democracy became a structure rather than a living organism that allows the participation of all in searching for the solutions and decision-making practice, in equality and without any form of discrimination. As a result of touching the lives of so many people ‑and with all modesty ‑ I came to see the simple truth: a real democracy is a comprehensive delivery system of human rights that can be realized through a never-ending, ongoing process of learning and integration at all levels of society of human rights as a way of life. There is no other option!

On the day the Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger – who was born in Graz Austria – allowed to put to death a prisoner who forty years earlier killed a policeman in a demonstration of black people who were calling for equality, the Mayor of the human rights city Graz personally took off the name of Schwarzenegger from the top of the Sports Arena. When asked why, he answered: ***Because Graz is a human rights city***!! (The death penalty is vehemently opposed in Austria by law!)

A final note: HRL should not be understood as another description of HRE. These are two very different categories and approaches. In five to ten years we hope to evolve movements that will have all people in the world learn, know, and own human rights as relevant to their daily lives, using the gained knowledge for planning their lives and taking relevant actions. Doing so they will be able to use human rights as a powerful tool for change, as a strategy to economic, societal and human development – joining in changing the world.

Human rights educators can indeed contribute very creatively to this essential process. Taking a step towards implementing a process of learning, let’s listen to what I have learned from Professor Abdul Lahi A’Naim, a Sufi who was exiled from Sudan, now at Emory University. He asserts that the only universal state of being is **Dignity**! Those of us who want to stay away from the statement that human rights is an imposition by the western countries on the rest of the world have those who make these statement listen to women and men in the village. Ask them to share with you their lullabies, legends, and personal historic memory. Every human rights mentor will be able to identify the yearning and celebration of dignity, decency, and trust in these stories and songs. This will affirm the fact that the international community listened, accepted, and honored these hopes and expatiations for dignity by creating the UDHR to confirm and celebrate human DIGNITY! – Many of my colleagues move through communities in their own countries using Abdul Lahi’s insight to evoke discussions about the meaning of human rights as a worldview relevant to people’s daily lives.

One of my mantra describes human rights as the banks of the river where life flows freely. And when the floods come, people who know and own human rights strengthen the bank of the river to prevent the floods and maintain freedom. Knowledge is power! – Learning about human rights as relevant to people’s daily lives, have us all move from slavery to freedom every day…--Every hour…--Every second of our lives. In conclusion allow me to share a pledge that I have original composed for the Economic Human Rights Movement in the USA. We had one thousand men in Japan hold hands and repeat it out loud, both in English and Japanese, and many other occasions around the world, also recently at a UN Program of 3400 high school students from twenty-four countries holding hands and saying:

We are the human rights generation.
 We will accept nothing less than human rights.
 We will know them and claim them.
 For all women, men, youth, and children,
 From those who speak human rights,
 But deny them to their own people.
 In our hands human rights is a way of being.
 We will move power to human rights.
 We have no other option!

Having taken this voyage I am grateful to have been given the chance to share these pages with others who have contributed their wisdom and experience. I see this as a mere beginning in the search of the meaning of life…--the meaning of human rights to our lives…--of a journey that you the reader may choose to take, to have every human being learn, know, own, plan, and act guided by human rights as a way of life for which we have no other option. It is our duty to close the gap of dignity!

Shulamith Koenig, PDHRE, 3 September 2012