

How Humanity Should Steer the Future

By Walter Putnam

The key to guiding humanity's future can be summed up in one word: compassion.

Compassion – a feeling for others – is what most makes us human. A spiritual element embedded in our DNA, it is as essential as our intelligence and the opposable thumb in advancing us as a species. Without it, whatever survives to dominate Earth and its environs would not be humanity but something else.

We need compassion to offset another great motivating drive: self interest, born of a natural instinct to survive. Throughout evolution and history, concern for self-preservation and empathy for others are often in conflict. However, now the assurance of self-survival as individuals is perhaps stronger than ever before, whereas we have a greater awareness than ever of the precarious position in the universe faced by life in general. It is crucial to elevate one human trait above the other.

Considering the grave threats that face our planet and its inhabitants, whether natural or manmade, the time has come to join together in a great spiritual movement with compassion at its core, in recognition of the fact that we are of a singular being. That is perhaps the only way to ensure that humanity and its civilization can advance on Earth and beyond.

This certainly is not a new concept. In fact, it lies at the heart of the world's other spiritual movements, religions that have underlain past advancements of monumental scale. For example, for all the criticism directed against them, Christianity and Islam together have been responsible for widespread migration of ideas which helped form cohesiveness of societies that allowed them to progress far beyond a spiritual realm. Humanism itself could be considered a sort of spiritual movement in that it champions the human spirit in aspiring for achievement and overcoming difficulties imposed by the natural world by both the individual and civilization as a whole.

Today, still early in the 21st Century, we are at a crossroads where humankind must decide what steps to take to avoid calamity on one or more of several fronts: overpopulation and overtaxed resources; destruction through environmental pollution and climate change; violent economic, social and political upheaval; nuclear holocaust; super volcanic activity; the possibility of an asteroid strike and dangers yet unseen.

When considering these threats it is important to recognize that we either have the technological capabilities of countering them or the scientific knowledge to develop those capabilities. But if science leads to knowledge and engineering provides competence to address

human problems there still is a missing ingredient, and that is to create the atmosphere to propel the masses to support endeavors that will take humanity and its civilization along the correct course.

Knowledge and competence are essential for success, but it is equally important to instill the spiritual impetus that will lead us into the future. "Spiritual" does not mean religious. Rather, we have to look at the root of the word – the Latin "spiritus," or breath, the essence of life – to get the proper sense of the type of emotional attachment required to motivate people to achieve goals for the common good.

For example, even if the entire world was united in the goal of expansion into space, would we be able to advance without specific interests undermining each other to further their own agendas?

In fact, we don't even have that unity. Not only is the vast majority of the global population concerned primarily with their own survival, but we have East vs. West, liberals vs. conservatives, Shia vs. Sunni, Arabs vs. Jews, and so forth in an almost endless variety of schisms that prevent practically any universal cooperation at all – much less space development.

It's probably safe to say that most people would consider themselves to be as concerned with the interests of others as they are with their own, or at least to have achieved a reasonable balance that falls short of self-abnegation without surrendering normal human compassion. Even if they feel that they fail to meet an ideal they would like to believe that they are working toward it.

The problem in today's political environment is not that individuals are disinclined to follow the impulse of empathy. It is that we all are faced with being held captive by an ideology of self-interest. Too many political leaders seem willing to encourage people to overlook the needs and aspirations of others lest they find themselves somehow getting the short end of the stick.

This common theme is struck through discourse on almost any matter, whether it is the economy, taxes, social issues or our foreign policy. The message is invariably the same: Watch out for **them**! "They" will take your jobs, rob you of your hard-earned fortune, disgrace your most cherished beliefs, invade your culture and transform it into their own. In short, "their" interests are being promoted over your own.

Unfortunately, although this message sometimes resonates with voters and wins elections for its advocates, it is not a foundation for sound governance. History is rife with examples of how the politics of self-interest triumphed for a time but failed in the long run,

just as individuals can cite instances in which we achieved success on one level or another while damaging relationships with others.

We should reject the rhetoric of division and work toward promoting the interests of all. We must recognize that we are all part of a greater, living entity – whether it is our Earth, God, or the Universe – and still champion individual rights and talents and the creative spirit that drives each of us to achieve and advance. We can continue our natural concerns for each other as human beings, and for protecting our planet and other creatures on it, while still maintaining our individual interests.

The key is to create awareness of the rational basis of space development, seeking the abundance of resources available outside the gravitational sphere, while giving people a reason to believe there is a higher purpose behind it. That is the sort of spiritual movement that will bring new birth to civilization, a new Renaissance – a Space Renaissance – to humankind.

And, it can be done without groups of people giving up whatever other beliefs they may have already. There is nothing inconsistent about pursuing one's faith in a supreme being and aspiring to reach closer to it by reaching out into the heavens. In fact, almost any religious practice already holds that as a goal.

Only a negative belief in pending doom for humankind can stand in the way of space advancement. And even if a large percentage of the global population has adopted such a belief at one time or another there is no reason to believe that it will prevail in the future. If we accept that there is a positive, creative force in the Universe then we must let it follow a natural course, recognizing natural obstacles but working together as a global community to overcome them.

Compassion as a guiding principle may be the only way to bond together to propel us from an Earth-bound to a solar civilization, the next evolutionary step toward a truly cosmic life presence.

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