

How global citizens can “do unto others”

Susan Koscis

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by Susan Koscis

Washington DC - My mother, who immigrated to America from Poland, often told me to follow the Golden Rule, to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

This fundamental principle, which transcends nations, peoples and time, was echoed in US President Barack Obama’s speech at Cairo University last Thursday.

While his words focused on improving US-Muslim relations, it was also about the fundamental values that speak to who we, as global citizens, want to be in the world.

Obama noted that “the interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart”, and added that “there must be a sustained effort to listen to each other, to learn from each other, to respect one another and to seek common ground.”

The principles of seeking common ground are the foundation upon which the conflict resolution field was founded. In this approach, individuals, groups or nations seek solutions to problems based on shared values and mutual interests.

Having spent the past 12 years working in an international conflict prevention and resolution organisation, I have seen first-hand illustrations of these principles in action. It was unthinkable, for instance, that Hutus and Tutsis could live together peacefully after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, yet 15 years later and after the implementation of peace-building programmes, this is the remarkable reality.

And these methods are applicable not only amongst people, but also between industries and governments. For example, health industry leaders, politicians and civil society leaders in the United States are finally working together today to achieve long needed healthcare reform, after decades spent fighting each other.

In Cairo, the president assured us that the potential for common ground does exist, not only between the United States and the Muslim world, but between all of us who share this planet.

“The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort – a sustained effort – to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.”

Proactively seeking common ground is needed if we are to address many of the challenges the world faces today, from global climate change to the Middle East conflict, from nuclear non-proliferation to the abortion debate in the United States.

In our world today there is much to fear. There is mistrust between nations, groups and between individuals. People are sceptical by nature and do not believe that systems and people can change. Many reviewers of Obama’s speech have called it naïve. Perhaps they are right, but what is the alternative to believing that humanity can transcend itself to assure our mutual survival?

Change begins with thoughts and words. Words and dialogue lead to understanding. Mutual understanding leads to action. And it is by our actions that we are able to transform our world.

Obama called his speech a beginning. Indeed, it is a noble beginning, one in which “treating others as we wish to be treated” becomes more than an individual lesson that a parent imparts to a child; it becomes a way of transforming the world.

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* Susan Koscis is director of communications at Search for Common Ground in Washington, DC. This article was written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews).

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