

THE OPPORTUNITY OF OUR TIME

Ricken Patel, Commonwealth Lecture 2013

Thank you, and thank you to the Commonwealth Foundation for its great work, and for this opportunity. I also want to thank my dream come true team, and the amazing Avaaz community, 20 million people strong as of this weekend!! In many ways I am here not by my own achievements, but by theirs.

Can I also just say that this is a big deal for me. I feel like my whole life has been a journey through learning and living and testing some of the thoughts I want to share tonight. And until now I've never felt ready, or maybe worthy, to share these things that I feel so deeply, publicly. So this is my first time speaking in quite this way. Thank you, really, for coming, and listening to me.

Something big is happening. From Tahrir Square to Wall St., from staggeringly brave citizen journalists in Syria to millions of citizens winning campaign after campaign for change, democracy is stirring. Not the media-circus, corrupt, vote-every-4-years democracy of the past. Something much, much deeper. Deep within ourselves, we are realizing our own power to build the world we all dream of.

But we don't have a lot of time to do it. Our planet is threatened by multiple crises - a climate crisis, food crisis, financial crisis, nuclear proliferation crisis... These crises could split us apart, or bring us together, like never before. It's the challenge, and the opportunity, of our time, and the outcome will determine whether our children face a darker world or one thriving in greater human harmony.

Tonight, I want to talk about this moment, this profound opportunity, and how we, as nations, organizations, communities and individuals, can seize it.

REASONS FOR HOPE

The Copenhagen climate conference in 2009 felt to me a bit like that decade's version of Woodstock or Spanish civil war. Tens of thousands of people gathered from every corner of the world to help save our planet. But it also sometimes had an air of the Titanic about it. I remember one committed person, who said something like "I know we're probably not going to save our planet, but I'm not going down without a fight."

Well, we won and lost at Copenhagen, but I feel that when you take the long view, that kind of pessimism is tragic, and unjustified, and sadly too common. So I want to start with what I believe are our tremendous reasons for hope.

If you look at our recent history, over the last few decades, the progress is astonishing.

In the last 30 years, we've cut global poverty from nearly 50% of the human race to approaching 15%. At the current rate, this generation will be the last to know poverty.

Look at democracy. We are in an unprecedented growth of democratic governance in the world today. For the first time in human history, over half of the world's peoples live under democratic governance.

Look at war. Deaths in war have been declining for 30 years, and since the Cold War powers stopped stoking their proxy wars across our planet a quarter-century ago, the incidence of war has dramatically declined.

Income per person is up 90% over the last 30 years. If you believe that prosperity is a necessary requirement for us to climb the hierarchy of needs, it's clearly escalating.

And perhaps the most powerful trend of the last 50 years is the unprecedented empowerment of women. The number of women members of parliament has gone from 1800 to over 10,000 since 1980. For the first time, half of our species is being liberated to bring their full brilliance, emotional intelligence and wisdom to every sector of our societies. There is perhaps no more powerful influence on the things I want to talk about tonight.

On dozens of metrics. Literacy. Life Expectancy. Internet Access. We can see gargantuan, historic progress. It's a basis for profound optimism, and it's a tragic fact that fatalism and cynicism are still so rife in our world today.

Hope, is something that springs fresh in the face of evidence. But all the evidence we have suggests that when human beings pursue collective aims together, we *can* achieve what we aim at. I've felt hopeless at times of failure or defeat, but then I remember that fatalism and cynicism are not just at best futile and at worst self-fulfilling prophecies. They are also incompetent. Practical idealism is not just our only hope, it's also just good sense.

So, much more than *just* having reason to hope, we have a responsibility to dream. Because all of our progress has been achieved by enterprising people who dreamed, and worked hard. From Dag Hammarskjöld and the building of the UN, to Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration on human rights, to Malala, a teenage girl whose dream of education for girls in Pakistan could not be stopped by a Taliban bullet. Memory, history, is consciousness. But it's a peculiar feature of our history, that we often remember and mark our tyrants and madmen, wars and warriors, more than the practical dreamers who built, brick by patient brick, the civilization we stand in today.

And when I let myself dream, the deeply exciting thing I feel, is that all of this progress has been fuelled by, and is fuelling, something much deeper. Deep within ourselves, we are realizing our power to shape the world we live in. There is a march of democracy sweeping across our world today. Not just in the millions that gather to end a despot's rule or the tens of millions that join campaign after campaign to improve our lives, but a revolution across every sector in our societies. Not just a new media, but a new politics, a new activism. A new democracy. The individual now has unprecedented power to access and publish, to connect, to organize, to affect. Power and agency is being spread out, flattened.

And this march is not chaotic. It has a vector. It's bringing us together. Our increasing ability to connect to each other is showing us that we are not as different as we thought we were. The moral distance between us is closing, as we realize that every human life is equally precious to us. All the barriers we've known -- of race, nationality, language, culture, religion, sexuality -- are coming down. And as they do, we begin to see ourselves in the other, and our capacity to act with empathy, and solidarity with one another, is escalating. All the fictions we were sold of the differences between us, the evils of the other are being shown to be untrue. John F Kennedy tried to bridge the gap between cold war rivals, calling on people to realize that we all breathe the same air, we all love our children. But we're realizing that we share vastly more than that. Psychologists are telling us that our internal mental environments are far more similar to each other's than we think. We

don't just breathe the same air, we overwhelmingly share all the same loves, fears and hopes for ourselves, our work, our families and our societies.

Our media and our political leaders have not told us this story enough because they are incentivized to focus on and often stoke our conflicts and our differences. But surveys of public opinion show that there is a world most people everywhere want:

96% of people worldwide want stronger protection of the environment, 87% want stronger protections for human rights, 86% want concerted action to reduce poverty and similar numbers, corruption.

These might sound like no-brainers. But think about it. Most countries now have a ministry of the environment and a host of legal protections that businesses can find cumbersome. And yet still, 96% of people want more.

But beyond alignment on goals, we also see overwhelming majorities on many of the means by which we reach our goals. 79% of people want a global treaty with clear emissions limits that will stop catastrophic climate change. Almost two-thirds of people want to strengthen the United Nations, and that number rises when you include a commitment to reform.

What about the conflicts, the real divisions? Well there are some, no doubt, but as far as most people are concerned, far less than we think.

Many people believe that Muslims in the Middle East are deeply anti-American. But in a massive survey effort by Gallup, they concluded that "Muslims don't hate America's freedom. They want it." and that the principle problem that Muslims have with the US is not with their values or people, but that their foreign policy in the Middle East has undermined freedom for much of the last 60 years. And George W Bush himself is on record agreeing with this.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perhaps the most intractable conflict, our hardest nut, where extremists on both sides have worked for decades to demonize the other. Even there, majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the world, support a fairly well-defined two-state solution. We know what the deal looks like, if we can free ourselves from the grip of the hardliners in Israel, Palestine, and Washington.

All these common desires reflect an understanding of our fundamental interests at the bottom of this march of democracy. In his phenomenal book, *Non-Zero*, Robert Wright powerfully argues that the arc of human history is characterized by the progressive realization of gradually larger groups of people that our interests are not zero-sum, not inimical to each other's. That the structure of our interests, across the board, is win-win. This reality, and our progressive realization of it, is part of what is driving the opportunity of our time.

THE CRISIS

But progress is not now, and never has been, inevitable.

Our connectedness and progress have brought with it an age of radical interdependence. We are both closer to each other than ever before, with unprecedented care, and more vulnerable to each other than ever before, with unprecedented capacity to harm each other.

Take our biosphere. The universe that human life can inhabit is razor thin. 3 km below our feet it's too hot for us to survive, 3 km above our heads the air becomes too thin to breathe. You could walk across the living universe in your lunchtime. This razor thin biosphere that sustains us survives by a delicate, miraculous balance, and we have the power to threaten it.

If I light this match, the carbon from it will go into our atmosphere and affect every other human being on the planet, equally. I will use up a share of the remaining carbon our biosphere can absorb, and bring us all closer to a series of tipping points. Points where excess carbon gas so acidifies our oceans that it kills off the plankton that we need to be eating carbon. Points where our arctic tundra thaws and releases billions of tons of methane gas, 75 times as toxic as carbon, into our atmosphere. My action is within my control, but the consequences of that action is to move us closer to a catastrophic chain reaction that is beyond any of our control.

Beyond climate change, we face a host of vulnerabilities to each other. The failure of the US government to adequately regulate its banking industry, or the tax avoidance and corruption of Greek elites, can trigger chain reactions that threaten the world with a great depression. Contagion is a word that vividly describes how, whether it is global pandemics or market panic, our fates are bound up with each other. In an age of radical interdependence, everything, both good and bad, is becoming more contagious.

And as the strain we place on the earth's rises, our vital resources are becoming scarce. Food supply is in question as countries scramble to buy vast tracts of land to feed their future, water supplies are strained by usage of communities and nations upstream and downstream. We are facing a new global scarcity, and scarcity can breed either cooperation or conflict.

Each of these crises are collective action crises. They can be solved if we all work together. But if we cannot, the consequences will be catastrophic. These crises could bring us together, or split us apart, like never before. That is the challenge, and the opportunity, of our time.

So what stands in our way? We have this inspiring march of democracy. We have this tremendous alignment of people everywhere on what we want and what we need to accomplish. What's slowing us down? It's not because tyrants stand in our way. The age of tyrants is passing. But we're moving into an age of tyrannical systems; of unseen, hard-to-engage-with, hard to understand systems hidden from our view, that frustrate and dilute and distract and obstruct the democratic will, the desires of most people everywhere.

Systems like the corporate capture of government in the lobby-ocracies that many of our countries are becoming. Where economic interests have a natural incentive to maximize profit by funding and incentivizing political leaders to serve their private interests above the common good -- undermining both democracy and a healthy market economy.

Systems like our winner take all domestic politics, where political factions are incentivized to exaggerate the differences we perceive between each other, because they stand to gain from the conflict that results. Or the equivalent in international politics, where extremists on either side of a conflict stoke war to shore up the domestic support they need to take and keep power.

Systems like the media-industrial complex, where barons like Rupert Murdoch and Silvio Berlusconi are able to manage democracies to their ends by manipulating the information that citizens have. And often these barons are the biggest drivers of our system of it bleeds-it-leads media, which finds that like sex, fear sells.

Systems like oligarchy and plutocracy, where a small group of families or a tiny class of wealthy individuals - generously named the 1% - operate from a conveniently unquestioned ideology that justifies subverting democracy to their ends. That one sounds classist, and none should be demonized for their wealth, but we must also face the fact that major banks are writing memos to their wealthiest clients identifying countries like the United States as emerging plutonomies, and recommending their clients get in on the gravy train.

And finally, systems like our dysfunctional international order, in which a club of state governments, half of whom are undemocratic, guard their power too jealously, blocking or diluting to the point of ineffectiveness thousands upon thousands of sensible global cooperative efforts that could improve our lives, or save them. At the UN I once watched the private negotiations of our nation's representatives for two weeks as they addressed, often late into the night, the burning issue of how to help the millions of people internally displaced by war. It was a paper world, the stakes already reduced to little more than what declaration to make. But even in that declaration, one by one, every word of substance and meaning and any prospect of producing change was stripped from the document because someone disagreed with it, most often Sudan, or Algeria, or the United States.

The structure of our international systems are not designed to optimize for the enlightened, long term interests of our nations and peoples. They're designed to minimize any potential short term clash with any one nation or government. They're built upon fear of each other, more than hope in shared enterprise. Instead of highest common denominator, they are lowest common denominator. Every common value is sacrificed to the value of inclusion, of keeping everyone in the tent.

There is another way, and it is not a utopia. We have only to look to the European Union, or with reservations, the WTO, for a model of transnationalism where inclusion carries significant responsibilities, as well as rights. Such a question of highest vs lowest common denominator is before this commonwealth of nations right now, in choosing whether to be led and chaired by a government that has been accused of massive human rights abuses. On this question and others like it, I believe our heads of state must meet their responsibility to listen to, and serve, the people of the world, and their long term interests.

So corporate capture, gladiatorial politics, oligarchy, media complexes, lowest common denominator global governance. These are the kinds of systems that prevent that expression of the common will, and that stand in the way of the profound opportunity we face in our time. We *can* overcome and reform them if we work together. But to do so we must confront the greatest source of their power - the power of fear to divide us. Across the world, a hopeful politics of community and cooperation, is in tension with a fearful politics of competition and conflict. The stresses of our interdependence and vulnerability are profound. Instead of wisely understanding the problems we face, opportunists can exploit fear to encourage us to blame them on the other, to demonize and divide. Instead of cooperating in a win-win effort, we scramble for a slice of the pie.

But, you might say, these tensions are age-old, they have played out throughout our history. We might be tempted to accept that that's the way things will always be.

But they can't be. Because the stakes have changed. Beyond these crises of radical interdependence, our capacities, our very power, threatens us.

Atomic energy was the first doomsday power that humanity created. Giving, potentially, one individual the power to wipe out human life. And soon after we invented it, we came within a hair's

breadth of doing exactly that. But it was not the only doomsday power that we have created or will create.

Ray Kurzweil argues that not only is our technological progress rapidly increasing, but the rate of acceleration is itself accelerating. We are at the knee of an exponential curve of advancement, where the next 100 hundred years could bring technological advancement equivalent to the last 20,000. Our power is increasing at an exponential rate. We don't know what the future will bring, but whether it is from a low cost form of geoengineering that could catastrophically disrupt our biosphere, biotech or nanotech or some other source, our capacity to destroy ourselves is escalating, and our wisdom about how to use this power *must* escalate with it.

It must because history is littered with the boom and bust cycle of civilizations. Jared Diamond tells us that the Roman empire and many others devastated their environments, a key factor that led to their collapse. But we are the first civilization to encompass all of humanity, and the first to have the capacity to destroy human life as we know it. The collapse of our civilization would almost certainly bring this result. And so that is why we cannot accept the politics and cycles of our history. Because stand or fall, we are the last civilization.

HIGHLY FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACIES

So what do we do?

70% of the world feel that the greatest challenges humanity has ever faced are happening right now.

When campaigners or policymakers face a problem, we often use a simple tool of a strategy tree. Put your goal at the top, and tell a story in steps of how you get there.

Let's take our goal as survival through the basic version of the world that most people everywhere want -- with peace, rule of law, human rights, an end to poverty, environmental sustainability, social justice and cohesion. How do we get there? It's not a utopia. It's roughly the difference between Sweden and Somalia, Costa Rica and Congo.

On issue by issue, when you try to find a path to change, you usually have to make one stop at some point. Government. Government is potentially the worst enemy of our collective aspirations, or our most powerful tool to build the world we dream of. There is no question of ignoring it. Those who believe that government is inherently inefficient and corrupt and incompetent, that it can be bypassed, have often been sold a fake bill of goods by others who know exactly how powerful and effective government can be, and want to use it for their own ends. So both because it is our most powerful and indispensable tool, and our greatest threat, government belongs at the top of our strategy tree. What kind of government would get us to our goal? Government that is highly accountable to people - a highly functioning democracy.

If we build highly functioning democracies at local, national and global levels, and in a critical mass of the world's nations, they would pass laws and make policies that reflected the world most people everywhere want. It's the most powerful single way to reach our goal. So this is the first step in our plan to save the world. How do we create a highly functioning democracy? I believe we can see a list of key ingredients, and strategies, that get us there.

First, we need a certain kind of media sector, because the media holds sway over our entire awareness of our world, and democratic decisions are only as good as the information we have in

making them. It's unacceptable that in many of our countries, a few individuals can own most of our media, and use that power for political ends. We need a series of reforms that break up the empires and the power of the media barons, and regulate the sometimes corrupt nexus of media and politics.

Second, we need a highly functioning political parties sector. First and foremost, we have to get money out of politics, to make sure that our representatives are accountable to people. In many developing countries, there is simply no sufficient source of political financing that is not corrupting. Political parties are tremendously powerful mediators of democratic life, but often shockingly unscrutinized. In some countries, one individual can actually own a political party. We need a package of reforms to ensure that parties are accountable and effective vessels of democracy.

Third, our government institutions need to change and evolve. Our systems of democracy are highly imperfect. They were largely developed in a time when societies were locked in a death struggle between two ideologies, each convinced of the false consciousness of the other. In that context, politics was war by other means, and it made sense to have winner-take all, last person standing processes. But this hackish adversarial politics doesn't resonate with my generation. Deliberative democratic theory offers us an alternative, where democracy is less like a boxing ring where interests duke it out, and more like a table and a conversation in which people listen and speak, and sincerely consider our challenges and the common good. For example, what if we behaved like ancient Athens, or like the community I serve, and randomly chose juries of citizens to consider and approve or reject the proposals of leaders? With the bar for approval being not 50%, but 80%?

Fourth, we need certain practices and institutions of citizenship. Many of us are not engaged in public life even to the point of voting, and fatalism and cynicism are rife. People too often take leave of their senses and their wisdom when they discuss politics. We need to foster a culture where we encourage and support each other to be citizens, and to step up to our responsibilities to be wise stewards of our societies, in part through movements and organizations that enable and empower citizenship, rather than factional agendas. What if we oriented our public education curriculum towards this goal? What if, as Bruce Ackerman has suggested, we were all given a "deliberation day" off to gather before elections to sincerely engage with each on the choice before us?

There are many more items on this ingredient list for a highly functioning democracy. The point is, for each of these, we can now imagine a series of strategies to get there. And for each of those sub-strategies, we can imagine a group or groups - citizen groups, coalitions, political parties or agencies - that might be organized and formed to pursue them. Once we've worked out that detail, we have a plan. Call it a 20 year plan to save the world. I'm passionate about this plan, but more passionate about the idea of having a plan that brings us together. One with room and respect for the diverse strategies that people might choose to get to our common goals. Because when we recognize a shared goal, and support each other's different roles in achieving it, then we've created something very powerful - a team.

But this kind of plan for reforms to achieve highly functioning democracy is not yet deep enough.

CULTURE CHANGE

Institutional agendas offer us a next step for the march of democracy to meet the challenge and opportunity of our time. But history teaches us that even the most beautiful constitution, system of checks and balances, and well conceived institutional structure and body of law, will often fail, if it

isn't infused with a culture of people that takes the spirit and the values of that system and that democracy to heart and reflects it in their individual choices and actions.

Margaret Meade said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." But in my experience, it's about thoughtful, committed citizens working together in highly performing teams that really saves the world. And those teams can be very small, or absolutely massive. Every single piece of that 20 year plan will stand or fall based on whether highly functioning teams and organizations in civil society and government can be formed to implement it. Management, that stale sounding word, is absolutely central to our ability to meet the challenge of our time - management is about the excellence with which we human beings make common cause, and achieve change together. And the public sector, from dysfunctional NGOs to vast government bureaucracies, is poorly managed.

The private sector is also often horrendously managed, but offers us some of the most advanced experiments in managing human enterprises. Our largest and most successful firms are perfecting different approaches. Built to Last, the seminal management practice book, profiles the leading firms in 50 industries and finds a powerful common denominator. Culture. A strong culture and understanding between people of what their work is, what values they employ and how they go about it unlocks the capacity for collective human excellence. But in my experience - for the institutions of the public sector - this is barely on their radar. I have yet to speak to a single person in the United Nations that talks about proactively defining and inspiring the organizational culture of that institution, despite the obvious need.

And as much as the ownership of the media sector is a problem, I believe the culture of our media professionals is a much greater problem. 80% of journalists believe they're more cynical than the general population, and they're right. That cynicism and a host of other cultural qualities dims the promise of even some of our most virtuous journalists to tell us an accurate story of who we are and what is happening in our world.

So we need a revitalization of the culture and management of our public institutions. Because the reason we fail, is not just because the forces of regress are strong, but because the forces of progress are too weak. Our civil society institutions, our governments, our international organizations and social movements, are fraught - they're strangled - by petty internecine conflicts, ego battles, competitions for status and privilege, false and proxy debates, and cynical competition between departments and individuals. In this unsupportive environment, we get burned, fearful, and often become highly risk-averse and controversy allergic. We spend a lot of time and energy, covering our asses. And along the way, our inspiring purpose and charge, gets lost. Our power, and the institutions that could channel our democratic power, are constrained by this failure to create healthy, effective cultures.

THE JOURNEY WITHIN

But that progress to a revitalization of our civic culture, can't be achieved without a journey within. A profound journey, that involves each of our individual abilities to come from hope and love, over fear or anger. We can't build the teams, the organizations, the leadership and society we want, without that journey.

Speaking for myself, I find a direct relationship between the quality of my leadership and my judgment in the world, how effective I am in bringing change, and my own journey within. I have found that how I react when I feel for example that someone is attacking me, challenging my

competence or authority, or taking credit from me, is both hugely important for what I can offer the world, and hugely dependent on my journey within. And on that journey I have found that almost every negative emotion I feel toward someone else, I can trace to some problem or embarrassment with myself. And if I love and accept myself completely, I have nothing but patience and love for others. I love my dad. He was hard on me. His dad was hard on him. Sometimes, I think a deep part of me, that older emotional lizard part of my brain, thought as a result that he didn't love me. But now I know that that was a falsehood born of fear. And I believe that realizing that truth, not just intellectually but emotionally, has set me, and my dad, and the children I will have some day, free.

There is a symmetry to things. To save our civilization we must love, and hope, and believe. But we cannot love and believe in others, until we love and believe in ourselves. That is why we must walk the journey within.

So politics is personal; the personal is political; and our capacities as communities, are an aggregate function of all of our individual journeys within, and our abilities to bring hope over fear, and love over anger. In graduate school I read Human Rights Watch reports about the unspeakable brutalities committed by the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone. I burned with a fire to stop those things from happening, and maybe also with a young man's fire to prove to myself that I was public-spirited enough to do it. I left for Sierra Leone right after graduation, and travelled inland to meet the RUF. There I spent hours with a commander, and challenged them over the killing of civilians. His explanation was honest, and angry, fearful, self righteous. But while his actions were grotesque, I could see in his path to them all the same forces of fear and anger at work in me, and all of us. And that understanding, that empathy, enabled me to see that there but for grace go I. And to shift from feeling a fire within me that burned against him and the way the world is, and towards I believe a much more powerful fire, that burns for what the world could be.

The great thinker Jeremy Rifkin has brilliantly charted the emergence of what he terms our empathic civilization, how our evolving understanding of ourselves is driving greater and greater abilities to empathize with each other. Neuroscience is proving to us that we are not the rational, cold, selfish creatures we've often been told we were. We are empathetic creatures that crave connection above all else. Solitary confinement is our greatest torture - it drives us mad, and we are connected in ways that we have only begun to understand.

And Rifkin points out that the discipline of psychology is just a hundred years old. Words like ego, self esteem, personal growth, have just been invented. With the consciousness that these concepts bring, our capacity to engage with the challenges of that journey within, is rapidly expanding. Positive psychology, the school that moves beyond treating illness to looking to enhance our health, is barely a decade old! One of the most exciting concepts in this school comes from Carol Dweck at Stanford University. In her book, *mindset*, she shows how the success of individuals in virtually every aspect of our lives and communities is heavily influenced by whether we have a growth or a fixed mindset. Whether we believe that our abilities are created through hard work and effort, or whether they are innately fixed. When we are growth mindset, we embrace our challenges, welcome feedback, and work far better with others. And a growth mindset can be taught.

So yes, we are on an exponential curve of interdependence, vulnerability, and power to destroy ourselves. But we are also on an exponential curve of our power to understand each other, accept and improve ourselves, and work together in flourishing teams and communities and movements and societies. The fearful fictions the divided us are falling away, and the truth is setting us free.

And that's why I feel a profound optimism at this moment, because what I see happening in the march of democracy is a deep flowering of human potential. I am here as a steward of a community of tens of millions hopeful citizens from every corner of this earth. But I'm here at this - the Commonwealth of nations, governments, some of whom commit grave human rights abuses, and I'm speaking in this hall, that is the beating heart of the world's largest, most powerful, and unaccountable, financial industry. And I came here to tell you that we're coming. Democracy is coming. But we're not bringing fire and destruction or self-involved activist narcissism or blind ideology this time. Democracy is young, but we're learning the lessons of our budding history. And this time we are bringing love, and hope, and a democratic sensibility, and an intelligent engagement with the problems that we all face. And it is because of that love, and that hope, that this time we, all of us, together, will bring a more profound and sustainable and unstoppable transformation than we've ever seen before. And all of us, together, will meet the challenge, and seize the opportunity, of our time. Thank you.