

**Rev. Adam Russell Taylor's Acceptance Speech after receiving 'Spirit of the UN'
Award**

(Rev. Adam Russell Taylor has served as the Lead for the Faith-Based Initiative at the World Bank Group through which the Moral Imperative Initiative to End Extreme Poverty emerged.)



“First I want to thank the NGO Committee, Genie, Azza, and all of the other leaders who were involved in the MI. I’m humbled and honored to receive this award- I want to share it with the all of the FBO and religious leaders who also shaped and led the Moral Imperative.

I want to thank the President of the World Bank, Dr. Jim Kim, for having the vision and foresight to revitalize the World Bank’s engagement with the world of religion. I want to thank Jill and Edith for their support along the way.

I grew up in the shadow of the civil rights struggle believing that I was born in the wrong era. My parents instilled in me the conviction that we are made in the image of God and that every person has inherent dignity and worth. In 1968 my parents made the controversial decision to get married (my mother is black and my father is white). At that time many states across the country banned interracial marriage until the Supreme Court decision of *Loving vs the State of VA* struck down these laws. My parents taught me that our diversity is a strength and a gift, as it reflects the very image of God. 1968 was also the year that Dr. Martin Luther King was tragically assassinated. 2018 has been filled with many commemorative events and remembrances around the life and legacy of Dr. King. Sadly there is often a tendency and temptation to sanitize and de-radicalize our modern day prophets like Dr. King. It is easy to embrace Dr. King’s dream of civil rights but far harder to embrace his courageous opposition to the triplets of racism, militarism and materialism that still haunt our world today.

When Dr. King gave his Nobel peace prize acceptance speech he said “I have the audacity to believe that people’s everywhere can have 3 meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men/women have torn down, other centered men/women can build up”.

I've tried to take Dr. King's words to heart and we can see his prescient vision reflected in what became the MDGs and are now the SDGs.

My burning bush moment came when I studied abroad in South Africa in 1997. Through volunteering in a township outside of Cape Town and doing an internship in Durban, I was exposed to extreme poverty for the first time. I came to see that as Ghandi once said, poverty is one of the worst forms of violence. *Poverty is deprivation. Poverty is alienation. Poverty is dehumanization. But poverty is a condition. People living in poverty are not defined by their poverty- they are defined by being bearers of God's image.* In the midst of extreme poverty I saw a great deal of resilience and hope.

I had a second burning bush moment when I returned to South Africa for the Int. AIDS Conference in 2000. Judge Cameron, a white SA judge who had gone public with his HIV status, gave the opening address. His words were both deeply moving and convicting when he said "My presence here embodies the injustice of AIDS because, on a continent in which 290 million Africans survive on less than one dollar a day, I can afford medication costs of about \$400 a month". He went on to describe how because of his skin color and status, he could afford to pay for life itself while AIDS represented a death sentence for the vast majority of black South Africans. His words exposed the inequality of the world and the brokenness of globalization, which felt inescapable and suffocating. After returning to the US, I started a nonprofit organization called Global Justice to mobilize college students around global human rights, starting with the AIDS crisis. In the process I came to believe that in the midst of the AIDS pandemic, HIV, which stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, when understood through the lens of faith, posed a challenge and opportunity to Heal the International Village. Addressing AIDS required addressing all of the root causes that fueled the crisis- from broken health care systems to gender based violence to poverty and beyond. It was at the International AIDS conference that I first met Dr. Paul Farmer and Dr. Jim Kim, who were both co-leading an inspiring org. called Partners in Health at the time. They both served briefly on the board of Global Justice. After Dr. Kim was nominated by President Obama and became President of the World Bank, I was asked to join the World Bank in a new role to help revitalize the Bank's engagement and partnership building efforts with the world of religion and faith-based organizations.

After starting in this new role my predecessor Katherine Marshal, who led the World Faiths Development Dialogue, warned me that during her tenure in the late 1990s, many Bank staff were quite resistant and viewed religion as being either "defunct, divisive or dangerous". Needless to say this was a pretty sobering reality check. Fortunately I found that the climate in the World Bank had become much more favorable for religious engagement- with most World Bank staff asking the question "how to best engage" faith inspired actors rather than whether we should engage. That being said, it was still very

challenging to mainstream engagement across Bank operations since the Bank's primary relationship is still with governments and religious engagement could risk being an afterthought.

I was given a seemingly mission impossible task to engage every religion in the world across every region in the world around almost every sector of development that the Bank was engaged in. I realized that after a period in which outreach and engagement with faith actors had been relatively dormant, it was critical to rebuild trust and revitalize relationships across the religious world.

While the misuse and abuse of religion has often served as a barrier to development, religious actors have made profound contributions across every facet of development- from providing relief in the times of crisis to delivering essential social services to igniting and fueling social movements. It is also naïve and short-sighted to ignore the contributions and role of religion when over 80% of the world self-identifies as being religious!

Through my experience having campaigned in support of the MDGs, I felt strongly that the SDGs needed a compelling and clearer moral narrative to inspire greater commitment and capture the imagination of people. Achieving the World Bank's dual goals to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to boost shared prosperity required more than technical solutions but also changing hearts and minds and galvanizing sufficient social and political will.

One of my professors at the Kennedy School named Marshal Ganz taught me about the power of public narrative. "Public narrative is a leadership art through which we translate values into action: engaging heart, head, and hands". Public narrative weaves together what the first century sage Rabbi Hillel said "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am for myself alone, what then am I? And if not now, then when? It combines the story of self with the story of us with the story of now.

Building on the critical role of public narrative, I helped convene a diverse cross section of religious and FBO leaders in 2015 for a Roundtable meeting with President Kim. Leading up to the meeting we worked with a diverse group of religious leaders to identify how our world's religions approach the imperative to combat poverty. The Moral Imperative initiative that emerged out of these discussions was my most gratifying effort, which I'm hopeful the World Bank will continue and build upon now that my successor is in place.

The world's major religions share many common beliefs that reflect an egalitarian and common good ethic. While there are differences, a common thread of shared values and convictions is woven across our world's religions- particularly a commitment to pay special attention to the most vulnerable and marginalized people- because their welfare

represents the very test of our politics. For example, Catholic Social teaching describes this ethic as a preferential option for the poor. For Jews this ethic is tied to the concept of shalom and Tikkun Olam, which tie together a commitment to peace, justice and environmental stewardship. In Islam, justice is an obligation and injustice is forbidden. For Christians a commitment to the poor is centered in Jesus' public ministry, which began when he returned to his home town of Nazareth and preached his inaugural sermon quoting the words of Isaiah that "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, to preach the good news to the poor, to set the captives free, lend sight to the blind and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4).

The Moral Imperative was always meant to be more than a statement, but instead a statement that catalyzes and strengthens faith-inspired movements to end poverty. The Moral Imperative emphasized three commitments/pillars to:

1. Strengthen the evidence base around the contribution and impact of faith-inspired actors
2. Mobilize the moral authority of religious leaders and their substantial constituencies to hold governments accountable and generate social and political will.
3. Foster more effective collaboration between religious and other dev. Actors (including the WB and UN)

The MI reads "As leaders from diverse religious traditions, we share a compelling vision to end extreme poverty by the year 2030. For the first time in human history, we can do more than simply envision a world free of poverty; we can make it a reality".

I still believe there is a moral imperative to end extreme poverty. Without sufficient social and political the SDGs will join a graveyard of many aspirational goals and broken promises to the world's most vulnerable and marginalized people. Yes, the SDGs need to be fueled by an irrepressible sense of urgency and inevitability!

Last week at the IMF-World Bank Group Annual Meetings took place in Bali- perhaps you have already heard some of the good news that came out of the meeting -The percentage of the global population living in extreme poverty has dropped from 36 percent in 1990 to 10 percent in 2015, the lowest it has ever been in recorded history. During that time, more than 1 billion people lifted themselves out of poverty.

This year's *Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report* expands the thresholds around poverty since a quarter of the world's population lives on less than \$3.20 a day, which is the typical poverty level in lower-middle-income countries. And nearly half of the people on Earth live on less than \$5.50 a day - the typical poverty level in upper-middle-income countries. The World Bank also launched the new multidimensional poverty measure, which takes into account deprivations in education, electricity, water, and sanitation.

And the WB launched the [Human Capital Index](#), which will help make the case for investments that build human capital.

These are hopeful signs. But there was also some sobering news. Poverty remains stubborn and resilient in many corners of the world and the pace of poverty reduction is slowing. Tragically, poverty is becoming more concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2002, the continent was home to just a quarter of the world's poor, but in 2015 more extremely poor people lived in the region – 413 million – than in the rest of the world combined.

It pains me to the degree to which the SDGs have become an after thought within the US political context and have failed to gain significant traction in far too many capitols across the world.

The SDGs pledge to create a world of dignity for all- but this world cannot be achieved as long as the storm clouds of protectionism, nativism and isolationism continue to rise. A world of dignity for all is undermined by doctrines of nationalism and provincialism, including the current America First doctrine in this country. A world of dignity for all will be out of reach when aid budgets are under threat, climate change continues to accelerate, many conflicts remain intractable, and corruption continues to be an all too common cancer.

Since we started with Dr. King I want to end with a quote from one of Dr. King's sermons, which far too few people read and are aware of. Dr. King preached that "the Saving of our world from pending doom will come not through the complacent adjustment of a conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority".

I love this dual commitment to be creatively maladjusted to the world around us and to be transformed conformists. People of faith must be creatively maladjusted to a world in which over five million children still die before reaching the tender year of five due to utterly preventable causes and nearly 250 million children are stunted. Our faith traditions teach us in different ways that we must be stewards of God's creation. Therefore we must be creatively maladjusted to environmental degradation and our world's addiction to carbon. Our faith traditions emphasize welcoming the stranger, which means we must be creatively maladjusted to xenophobia in all of its forms and work to reverse the current forced displacement and refugee crisis.

But being creatively maladjusted is not enough. Faith enlists us in becoming transformed nonconformists- in other words we must be transforming agents in the world. We must seek to transform the broken politics and priorities around us.

Yes, to achieve the SDGs we will need a data revolution, we will need to be driven by evidence, we will need technical expertise, we will need to leverage new forms of finance, etc. All of these are critical but they be insufficient unless we also inspire hope and transform broken political priorities. As the MI says “Now is the time to turn fatigue into renewed commitment, indifference into compassion, cynicism into hope, and impotence in to a greater sense of urgency that we can and will end extreme poverty by 2030”.

I still have the audacity to believe that the faith community and faith-based organizations can be a game changer around the SDGs- but we will need to tap into the deepest and best values and convictions within our religious traditions. We will need to harness the full contribution of religious and faith-based actors, including their moral authority.

The Moral Imperative ends with a statement that is as urgent and relevant today as it was in 2015- “Poverty’s imprisonment of more than a billion men, women and children must end. Now is the time to boldly act to free the next generation from extreme poverty’s grip”. Now is the time to end extreme poverty.”

This speech was delivered by Rev. Adam Russell Taylor on 23 October 2018 during the 2018 Spirit of the United Nations award ceremony at the Church Center of the United Nations in New York, United States of America.