

THE DECLARATION OF HUMAN ETHIC¹

PREAMBLE

We live in an age of globalization. Billions of people today are directly involved in the planet-wide human society—by traveling to distant places, by interacting with members of other cultures in person, on the phone, or through the internet, by participating in the global economy, by contributing to the art forms distributed internationally, and more—and this number is growing. Our era’s unprecedented level of intercultural communication has brought with it unprecedented diversity and mutual awareness, as well as conflict and strife. In the proliferation of small and large scale wars, new epidemics and resistant strains of disease, terrorism, cybernetic crime, human trafficking, global warming, and other calamities that know no borders, the need has become apparent that we—all people, regardless of our particular beliefs, positions, or origins—declare our stand on a universally human ethic.

By virtue of living as individuals in communal structures, by virtue of our inherent freedom and dignity, each and every one of us occasions influence on those who surround us. Through the vast network of global interaction, therefore, each person is in the position through her or his actions to have an impact on the quality of life of the whole of humanity, on animal life, and on the environment of the Earth. Thus, in this intricate and delicate balance of the whole and its innumerable parts, the good done for a community on a large scale benefits all its members, and the good done for one person contributes to the good of the whole community.

To guide our actions, throughout human history and around the globe, communal wisdom expressed in religious, ideological, and philosophic worldviews has prescribed the rules of conduct for human beings toward each other and toward the surrounding world. While different voices at different times have formulated their ethics in different ways, they have endeavored to speak to all humanity, and we find numerous common notes in these voices. We consider our differences deliberately and respectfully, but we look to our commonalities for the tools to enable humanity to survive and to thrive in a global age. We preserve and marvel at the beauty of our diversity, but we put great hope in the depth of our unity as an engine of change away from divisiveness and violence toward mutual acceptance and coexistence, as a foundation of our peaceful future.

A persistent motif in the ethics of many cultures has been an imperative to act toward others as we would have others act toward us, or at least not to act upon others in ways we would not like to be acted upon. It is known to some as “The Golden Rule.” This common sentiment has provided intuitive guidance to people for many centuries, and we believe that its basic tenet holds for us today. In today’s intermingling, global world, however—in the world where friends and neighbors may come from very different cultures and not share customs, religions, or other preferences, in the world where chance encounters often bring the unknown on the previously unimagined scale—in this new world the Golden Rule carries new meaning and new challenges.

In recognizing that persons of different cultures, origins, and preferences desire to be acted upon in different ways, let us thus endeavor to learn about each other in good faith, whenever possible, before acting upon each other. At the same time, in recognizing that certain basic desires and qualities are common to all human beings, let us be guided in our interactions by the broadly understood Golden Rule: “Act toward others with compassion, with respect for their freedom and dignity as human beings, and with the greatest possible deference to their personal, cultural, social, religious, and other preferences. Do this because this is how you would like to be treated.”

DEFINITIONS

In declaring our adherence to the following Human Ethic, we do not intend for it to serve as a legally binding document or an exhaustive code of behavioral guidelines but rather as a brief and broad statement of our shared values and convictions as they pertain to the ways in which human beings act upon each other and upon the world.

Many words and expressions hereby used are not defined and will be understood differently by persons of different ages, origins, cultures, positions, and opinions. This is done deliberately and for two reasons:

1. We do not claim an absolute understanding on behalf of humanity of such questions difficult, controversial, and often mysterious as when life begins or ends, when a child becomes an adult, or what makes a family. We do not find an understanding of these and many other concepts that is common enough throughout the global human community to use here at this time. Yet an ethic is as fluid and flowing a process as life itself, and so as humanity's understanding changes and develops, so—we hope—will the details of this declaration.
2. We cannot imagine a better reason for persons and communities in disagreement on definitions to come together persistently and in good faith to develop a more common understanding than finding that they agree whole-heartedly on the same ethical principles and pledge to adhere to the same ethical commitments that use such definitions. We hope that this articulation of our common spirit and our common good intentions will spark a further exploration of the global ethic discourse.

In light of the aforesaid and for the sake of clarity, however, we hereby define those terms, words, and phrases that are used with specific meanings in this declaration and that we do not wish to have misunderstood:

Person/human being: an individual of the human species, of any age, sex, gender, genetic make-up, ethnic origin, mental capacity, and physical characteristics. While certain rights and/or responsibilities do not apply to those incapable of self-determination (such as children, those mentally ill, those emotionally disturbed, those under duress, those incarcerated, etc.), the principles of worth and dignity apply to all human beings without exception.

Dignity: a reflection of the inherent and immeasurable worth and value of each human person and thus a quality of each human person that signifies corresponding respect due each person. While a person's dignity is not contingent upon the actions of others, it can be affirmed or violated by other human beings.

Freedom: an opportunity to make and to act upon a personal choice; an opportunity for self-determination. While the laws of nature and the needs and rights of others in communal settings make it impossible for any human being to be fully free without limitations, personal freedom is an inherent basic right of every human being capable of making choices and is thus cultivated and thoughtfully balanced against the freedom and dignity of others.

Community: a group of persons formed naturally, traditionally, or voluntarily and unified by regular interaction and/or common interests and/or goals. Examples of community vary greatly in size and character. Some examples are: an extended family, a sports club, a religious group, a village, a professional association, a cult following, a tribe, a political party, an ethnic group, a sovereign state, an alliance of states, etc.

Community leader: a person in the position of highest authority in a community, the final decision-maker of a group. Examples of community leaders vary greatly. Some examples are: the head of a sovereign state (president, king, prime minister, etc.), a tribal chief, a village elder, the head of a clan, the head of a family, a religious leader (shaman, priest, imam, rabbi, minister, pope, prophet, etc.), elected official, club president, military officer, etc.

Ethic: a consistent and coherent series of statements describing a preferred model of human behavior that is meant to maximize the good and/or to minimize the harm done by human beings.

DECLARATION

In light of the foregoing preamble and based on the foregoing definitions of terms, we, the undersigned, hereby declare, as ethical human beings, our core principles and our commitments.

We hold the following *Principles* to be essential to the understanding of our human ethic:

i. Every human being is of inherent and immeasurable worth and value.

This means that:

1. Preservation of human life and dignity is above every other consideration.
2. No one person's life or dignity is worth more than another's. When faced with difficult decisions that involve unavoidably doing harm to one person or another, we make these decisions based on considerations other than the relative worth of human beings. Rather, we consider our hereby declared principles and commitments intended to advance freedom, peace, acceptance, dignity, and opportunity.

ii. All persons endowed with intelligence and conscience and capable of making ethical decisions have a responsibility to treat all other persons humanely and to act conscientiously toward all living beings and toward the whole of the environment.

This means that:

1. All persons who are able to choose their actions respect this ability in others and compassionately protect those who, for any reason, are unable to choose their actions.
2. All persons (capable of such recognition) recognize that animals may experience an emotional impact of human action in the form of love, pain, fear, etc. and are thus guided by compassion and respect in their actions toward animal life.
3. All persons (capable of such recognition) recognize that human action may have a direct impact on the state of the Earth's environment and that all things, living and non-living, are connected and interdependent; thus, all such persons act in such a way as to minimize harm to the environment and to preserve and restore wherever possible natural resources and ecosystems.

iii. Both individual persons and communities are basic units of the human society and thereby possess inalienable rights and responsibilities toward each other.

This means that:

1. All human persons are autonomous beings and thus possess inalienable rights of individual freedom and self-determination. At the same time, all human persons are communal beings and thus possess social responsibilities and are answerable to their communities.
2. All communities are autonomous entities and thus possess inalienable rights of existence and self-governing. At the same time, all communities are groups of autonomous beings and thus possess responsibilities toward and are answerable to each one of their members.

3. Both individual persons and communities, on all levels, must strive to interact with each other peacefully and respectfully, as free and responsible units of one global society.

Based on the foregoing principles, we pledge to adhere to the following *Commitments*:

1. ***To equality before the law***

We commit to treating all human beings answerable before the law equally, without regard to sex, gender, race or color, ethnicity, language, nationality, religious or secular worldview, sexual orientation, age, political opinion, social status, place of origin, etc.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. Those entrusted with this responsibility, such as members of law enforcement and judicial systems and community leaders, make an utmost effort to bring to justice all those who are guilty of crimes against persons.
2. Those entrusted with this responsibility, such as members of judicial systems and community leaders, make an utmost effort to ensure that no person innocent of a crime suffers punishment for that crime.
3. All persons capable of decision-making make an utmost effort to ensure that in their communities any person accused of a crime receives a fair hearing and an opportunity for defense before any punishment is carried out.

2. ***To freedom of movement***

We commit to treating all human beings as free and entitled to basic liberties and to oppose the practices of slavery, forced labor, and unjust imprisonment.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. No human being restricts the movements of other human beings except when prescribed or allowed by the laws of the community, such as the laws concerning national boundaries, private or governmental property, lawful incarceration, care of children and mentally disabled, etc.
2. No human being sells or trades another human being for a price or forces another human being to work against his or her will.
3. Those in positions of authority, such as members of government administrations, law enforcement, and community leaders, make an utmost effort to ensure that no human being is held or imprisoned unjustly or without cause or held without charges for extended periods of time.

3. ***To freedom of conscience***

We commit to respecting the right of all human beings to hold religious, scientific, ideological, social, and political convictions of their choice.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All persons recognize and respect the right of others to hold and to express any, including minority, points of view without fear of retribution.
Conversely and at the same time, freedom of thought implies a responsibility of word. No person capable of ethical decision-making publicly calls to violence or engages in speech intended to cause, incite, or promote the doing of harm to other human beings or to the environment.
2. Those in positions of authority and those charged with preserving public order make an utmost effort to protect the freedom of conscience and peaceful discourse in their communities.

3. Those in the position to influence communal policies make an utmost effort to ensure that, whenever and wherever possible, to the greatest possible extent, all adult persons capable of decision-making are given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

4. ***To preservation of peace***

We commit to the utmost effort to resolve all conflicts by peaceful means and to resort to the minimal required force only in self-defense or in defense of others and only as a last resort.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All human beings and communities make an utmost effort to nurture and preserve peace and cooperation where they exist, to avoid violence, and to restore peace in times and places of conflict through such means as mediation, persuasion, example, and aid.
2. No human being deliberately kills or injures another human being for any reason except in defense of self or others in the case of imminent danger and only if no other effective defensive action can be found in time.
3. Both individual persons and communities make an utmost effort to coexist peacefully while using acceptance, sharing, negotiation, diplomacy, and other peaceful ways of addressing tensions that arise in the contexts of resource distribution, ethnic differences, religious or ideological disagreements, power allocation, and other potentially conflict-ridden situations.
4. Whenever the use of force cannot be avoided, all armed combatants and especially those in positions of authority make an utmost effort to shorten the conflict, minimize casualties, avoid harming unarmed civilians and the environment, treat captured enemy combatants with dignity, provide aid to all wounded and injured regardless of affiliation, and abide by other internationally accepted criteria of conduct in war.

5. ***To preservation of dignity***

We commit to preserving the intrinsic dignity of every human being and condemn such degrading practices as rape, sexual abuse, torture, deliberate humiliation, and cruel punishment.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. No human being deliberately and against another's will inflicts pain upon another, exploits another's fears, unique weaknesses or vulnerabilities, deprives another of human contact for extended periods of time, deprives another of religious or cultural observances, humiliates or degrades another, forces another to participate in sexual activity, or tortures another in any way, for any reason, or to any end.

6. ***To freedom of information***

We commit to respecting the right of all adult persons to have access to and to disseminate the best possible current information.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. Community leaders and those entrusted with informing their communities, such as members of the press and the mass media, make an utmost effort in delivering information to their communities to be truthful, accurate, complete, responsible, and as impartial as they can.
2. Those in positions to exercise authority over dissemination of information make an utmost effort to ensure that access to accurate and up-to-date information is not restricted and that no one is persecuted for engaging in retrieval and dissemination of information.
3. All persons recognize certain exceptions to the freedom of access to information necessary for the functioning of human communities. For example, access may be

restricted to information that violates privacy, confidentiality or security of other persons, communities or states.

7. *To safety within families*

We commit to fostering the atmosphere of safety, respect, care, and support among family members, sexual partners, and members of other family-type relationships.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All persons involved in families and family-type relationships make an utmost effort to create a safe environment for their partners and family members and to respect, care for and support them in times of hardship, weakness, illness or injury, or other crises.
2. No person involved in a family and/or family-type relationship neglects, abuses physically, sexually, verbally or emotionally, exploits, harms or exposes to harm her or his partners or family members.
3. No person involved in a family and/or family-type relationship uses shame, psychological pressure or physical or financial dependence to threaten or blackmail his or her partners or family members or forces them to remain in the relationship against their will.

8. *To protection of children*

We commit to fostering healthy development of children and to protecting children from abuse and exploitation.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All parents, guardians, and those charged by their communities with caring for children recognize that, to develop into productive and happy adults, children require a safe environment, adequate nutrition, and an opportunity to learn, to play, to love, to be loved, and to interact with adults and other children; thus, all adult persons caring for children make an utmost effort to provide such an environment for every child.
2. All adult persons make an utmost effort to rescue children who are exploited as armed combatants and to prevent this from happening to other children.
3. All adult persons, especially those in positions of authority in policy-making and in commerce, make an utmost effort to eliminate the harmful use of child labor and to prevent children from working in “sweat shops.”
4. Recognizing that children are not responsible for the actions of their parents, no adult person discriminates against children due to their parents’ or their families’ actions, including children born out of wedlock and children of convicted criminals.
5. No adult person sexually molests or abuses a child or deliberately harms a child physically or emotionally.

9. *To fulfillment of talents*

We commit to providing every possible opportunity to all human beings for development and productive use of their talents and passions.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All persons, especially those in positions of influence in their communities, recognize the need for and make an utmost effort to provide access to the highest possible level of education to all children and to all adults who desire it.
2. All persons, especially employers and those in the position to influence policy, recognize that fulfillment of a human being is partially predicated upon his or her ability to apply talents and acquired skills; thus, all such persons make an utmost effort to provide access to a job or appropriate work or professional endeavor for all adult human beings who

desire it and to maximize as much as possible available choice of professions and occupations.

3. All persons endeavor to develop and to use their talents and skills, to the best of their ability, for personal fulfillment and to contribute to the good of their communities throughout their lifetimes.

10. To dignified labor

We commit to upholding the standards of dignified labor.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All employers and those in the position to influence labor policy make sure that every person who works or performs a service is justly compensated and receives a fair living wage and accommodations for illness, pregnancy, child and family care, and for other special circumstances that enable him or her to afford to live in safety and with dignity.
2. All employers and those in the position to influence labor policy recognize that leisure, as well as labor, is a crucial part of human life and development; thus, all such persons make sure that every person who works is afforded enough time for rest and leisure activities every day, as well as regular days off and vacations, without the fear of losing her or his job.
3. All human beings, especially those in the position to influence labor policy, employers, and workers, recognize the importance of decent working conditions to the preservation of human dignity and happiness; thus, all such persons make sure that no human being is forced to work unreasonably long hours, in inhumane or harmful conditions, without regular breaks, with unacceptable levels of noise or light, in unacceptable temperatures, or in otherwise unacceptable working conditions.

11. To caring for health

We commit to maintaining the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of humanity and to bringing relief to those who are ill, injured or suffering to the best of our ability.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All persons, especially those in the position to influence policy and those trained to care for the health of others, recognize that physical, emotional, and mental health are crucial to every person's quality of life and to communal well-being; thus, all persons make an utmost effort to preserve health by such means as education and preventive care.
2. All persons recognize that the need to be helped when ill, injured, or in pain is one of the most basic human needs. Thus, all persons, especially those trained to care for the health of others, make an utmost effort to provide best available aid and comfort to those who are suffering, regardless of circumstances, affiliations, or convenience.
3. Recognizing the immeasurable and thus financially unquantifiable worth and value of every human being, recognizing the financially unquantifiable nature of human suffering, all medical professionals and those in the position to influence healthcare policy in communities with organized healthcare make an utmost effort to ensure that no one is turned away or refused medical care for inability to pay or for other financial or bureaucratic reasons.

12. To fair dealing

We commit to dealing honestly and fairly in exchanges of property and services.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All persons respect the property of others; no person engages in robbery, thievery, swindling or fraud. Conversely and at the same time, those charged with preservation of

order in their communities, such as community leaders, militias, members of legislatures, judiciary, and law enforcement, recognize and justly account for special circumstances, such as facing starvation, that may mitigate responsibility for commission of crimes against property.

2. Community leaders and those in positions of authority, such as members of legislatures and law enforcement, make sure that no unjustified, discriminatory, or arbitrary confiscation of property takes place in their communities.
3. All human beings, especially community leaders and those in the position to influence policy, endeavor to find and maintain fair and equitable ways of distributing wealth, property, and resources.

13. To artistic expression

We commit to respecting the human need for free artistic and cultural expression and to providing every possible opportunity for creation and consumption of music, dance, verbal and visual arts, and other forms of art and entertainment.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. No human being deliberately attempts to suppress artistic or cultural expression of another for reasons other than preserving or defending the freedom and/or dignity of self or other persons. No community suppresses artistic or cultural expression of its members for reasons of arrogance or intolerance. No majority suppresses artistic or cultural expression of a minority unless such expression explicitly calls to violence or threatens the survival or well-being of the community.
Conversely and at the same time, freedom of artistic expression implies responsibility to be respectful of others' cultural norms, to be appropriate to one's context and setting (such as presence of children), and to avoid calls to hatred and violence.
2. All persons, especially those in the position to influence policy and those with financial means, make an utmost effort to promote the arts, to make access to arts and entertainment affordable, to allow talented individuals to pursue training in their chosen forms of art, and to encourage free artistic exchange.

14. To protection of the environment

We commit to treating animals and every living being with care and respect and to the preservation of the environment in the awareness of our mutual interdependence.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All human beings treat animals with the greatest possible kindness and compassion; no human being engages in acts of animal cruelty.
2. All human beings make an utmost effort to protect the lives of plants and animals and destroy plants and animals only if necessary, such as for food and warmth. No human being kills animals for pleasure.
3. All persons, especially those in the position to influence policy and those in the positions of authority in industry and commerce, make an utmost effort to ensure that the Earth's natural resources are used or harvested responsibly, never wastefully, with care and strategic long-term planning for preservation of the environment.
4. All human beings, especially scientists, community leaders, and those in the position to influence policy, endeavor to find new ways of preserving the environment, reversing global warming, reducing energy consumption, creating clean sources of energy, and more. All human beings make an utmost effort to participate in the environmentally friendly ways of life, even when it requires sacrificing convenience or reconsidering our current ways of life or of doing business.

15. To respectful mutual aid

We commit to extending a helping hand to those in need who desire our help, whenever possible, with respect to their individual and cultural uniqueness.

In pursuing this commitment:

1. All human beings recognize the basic human needs for adequate nutrition, clean drinking water, shelter, clothing, and medical aid. All human beings and communities make an utmost effort to ensure that everyone has access to these essentials, both in their own communities and in other areas of the world, every day and during economic crises, natural disasters, military strife, or other calamities.
2. All human beings and communities recognize that the responsibility to provide aid and relief extends across community boundaries.

Conversely and at the same time, all human beings, especially community leaders, those in the position to influence international relations, and representatives of autonomous communities and sovereign states, recognize that providing aid with respect and in the way that is welcome may require thoughtful consideration, cooperation, and negotiation.

¹This version of a *Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic* was produced by the graduate students of Professor Leonard Swidler's graduate seminar on *Interreligious Dialogue*, Temple University Department of Religion, Fall 2008. The students were: Maria Kaplun (maria.kaplun@temple.edu), Rebecca Mays (rgkmays@hotmail.com), Per Faaland (per.faaland@temple.edu), Jessica Sitek (jessica.sitek@temple.edu), and William Cullinan (wcullina2002@gmail.com).