

## **The Freedom to Be Yourself: The Essence of Homo Nexus**

The dignity of the individual—in particular, the individual right to make decisions, innovate, and achieve—is an essential, innate requirement for life on earth. This right can't be reserved to just a chosen few or placed in the hands of governments, big businesses, religious institutions, or other impersonal organizations.

At the same time, the ability to fully realize our individual potential and to fulfill our rights to innovate and achieve are dependent on our relationships with others. Human beings are not isolated particles; we are naturally part of a vast network of connections, from which we derive a major portion of our meaning. Everyone on earth should have the opportunity to make the most of these connections—because the more each one of us flourishes, the more fully we all realize our deepest humanity.

These are truths that have haunted and shaped me since I was a teenager. I've always seen the logic, and felt the gratification, in working with others to achieve a common goal. For this reason, I've long been an activist and an organizer—the kind of person who is continually seeking out others and striving to find ways to work together for the greater good, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

One of my personal turning points took place back in 1986 when I was a high school junior at Milton Academy near Boston. Helen Caldicott, the Australian physician who founded the anti-nuclear organization Physicians for Social Responsibility, gave a talk the school. She described in detail the consequences of a nuclear holocaust.

I was horrified—and motivated. Until then I had been a carefree kid, without any particular focus or engagement. It was as if some spirit breathed itself into me and urged me to action, a spirit that has never left me. I talked to my classmates,

drew up a plan, and got a Milton Academy faculty advisor, Dale Deletis, to help us organize a national petition drive seeking an annual, televised public meeting to address major issues such as nuclear or environmental threats. My idea was to create a forum in which high school students would grill world leaders.

Through determination and networking, I was able to muster support from a varied group of powerful individuals and organizations. Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, Senator Ted Kennedy, The League of Women Voters, Elliot Richardson (Richard Nixon's attorney general, who resigned rather than carry out Nixon's order to fire Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox) – all of them were sponsors of the National Forum idea.

We collected signatures from high school students in all fifty states, aiming for a total of half a million supporters. Our effort was covered in major news media, including the *Christian Science Monitor*, which reported:

Growing numbers of American high school students have declared themselves ignorant. But they're not asking their teachers for help.

They're "storming" the networks and demanding national time. Their goal: to persuade national TV to air an educational forum on the nuclear arms issue—one *specifically* aimed at a high school audience.

We wanted a panel of four or five students to ask questions of four powerful speakers; and we wanted one of these speakers to be President Reagan. The forum was to be a start, not an end in itself. The idea was that better informed students would become empowered, active citizens.

This was the first time in my life that I observed the power in bringing together people from different political, social, geographical and organizational backgrounds. I understood I could make a difference. Perhaps more important, I understood that whatever contribution I could make depended on the involvement, energy, and commitment of others. To me, the first lesson in collaboration is that it is sometimes better to be a co-founder than a founder. Being non-zero-sum was becoming clearer to me.

Unfortunately the National Forum idea wasn't sustainable in the wake of our failure to get President Reagan to take part. As is in the nature of a student group, we lost focus as people graduated and moved on. But a seed had been planted in me, though at the time I had no idea what kinds of fruit would ultimately grow from that seed. I set forth—semi-consciously at this stage—on a lifelong quest to explore the idea of human freedom and the right of every person to develop his or her potential to the fullest.

It's a timeless reality as old as the human race itself: Some destroy; others build. Having been lucky enough to have inherited a legacy from a family of builders, I've spent my life thinking about what makes building possible in an often chaotic, destructive world. Looking back on the great teachers of human history—figures like Socrates and Buddha, Abraham and Moses, Jesus and St. Paul, Confucius and Mohamed, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.—we can see that they all responded to tyranny, repression, and hatred with a message of freedom, individual dignity, and love.

It's our mission today to translate that message into the language of the twenty-first century, and to apply its wisdom to solving the enormous challenges—economic, environmental, political, and social—that threaten human existence in our time. This is where the concept of Homo nexus comes in.

The human rights of personal dignity, freedom, and self-expression were first articulated in eras of autocracy, repression, and violence by a handful of visionary prophets and leaders who popped up in widely dispersed, unpredictable times and places around the world—people like Socrates, Buddha, and Jesus. The story of human evolution is the story of how these ideas took root, spread, and began to be realized in specific societies, until today the whole world is yearning for them to become living realities for every woman and man. Now the coming of Homo nexus helps to explain this yearning and points us toward the steps needed for its fulfillment in the global, technologically empowered, networked world of the twenty-first century.