

# Robert Muller

## *Remarks on the Present State of the World, Inspired by the Philosophy of Thomas Paine*

The series *Visionaries of World Peace* launched by UNIPAZ is a magnificent example of what that University can do. Not only does it revive the memory of great peacemakers throughout the ages, but it plays also the role of a University, of an educational institution. I knew little about Thomas Paine until this Colloquium was decided upon. Its preparation forced me to read a lot of his works and about him. The result was that I suddenly felt ashamed by the example of this extraordinary man who revealed to me that I had viewed my role as a peacemaker in a rather petty way. I thought that I was doing a lot for peace, having worked in the UN for forty years and always been at the forefront of building peace and new global instruments. I felt rather happy, content and proud of myself. And here enters into my life a man who shows me by his example that I was quite off the mark, that I should have been much more forceful, infinitely more audacious and less compromising with the prevailing beliefs, values, prejudices, and public opinion of my time. He emphatically stated that he would never allow public opinion to shape and influence his beliefs, that truth alone was his yardstick. He cut me up like a surgeon, reassembled me and made me a neo-revolutionary. That is why, in these few minutes, I will propose that you ask yourself this question as he would do if he were alive today:

Which are the seemingly impossible challenges of our age which Thomas Paine would raise to the sky with uninhibited courage and which will be solved in the decades or century ahead, as were those he raised in his time? This could be the practical outcome of this Colloquium. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of Thomas Paine, espouse his personality, and look at our present planetary and social conditions as he would do.

Since he was a technologist, he would certainly marvel at our scientific and technological achievements, at our planes, our satellites, our factories, our power plants, our universities, our computers, atomic bubble chambers, microscopes, telescopes, and so forth. He would be thrilled by the existence of the United Nations where all nations do meet for the first time. He would probably become a delegate to it! But, this

being said, do you think that he would agree with the type of society and world disorder in which we live? Certainly not. He would slash through it exactly as he did at his time. He would look for the truth and denounce all prejudices and wrong beliefs, irrespective of dominant public opinion. He would give the world an agenda of major reforms for the next decade, century, and millennium which is only twelve years away. We must seek in our respective professions and walks of life what is basically wrong, what must be corrected on our evolutionary path, and what is the truth about our present human condition. I will highlight a few of these basic questions which are my 'Paine interrogations.' He dealt with the American and French Revolutions. Today he would deal with worldwide revolutions.

First, he would say: 'You know enormously about your planet, from outer-space to the inside of the atom, from the poles to the tropics, from the ozonosphere to the depths of the seas and oceans. You know all you need to know about humanity. You know for the first time how many people live on this planet, while we had no idea of it. You know how long people live in various parts of the world, their levels of health, nutrition, and education. What you know is prodigious, unprecedented in human evolution. You have for the first time in the human species' history good inventories of your planetary home and of the human race. But what do you do with this knowledge? Are you managing this planet well, now that you have become its masters? Are you creating the necessary harmony between the human species and the planet? I wrote in my time about the Rights of Man. Today I would write about the Rights of the Earth. I would draft a Declaration of the obligations of Man towards the planet. You are in a completely different situation. What you are doing is by and large endangering and damaging your planet. You call it "development," but when I look around I see more destruction than development.' He would write inflammatory pamphlets about that. He would open the eyes of the public to what we all perceive deep in our heart but do not dare to say, because of prevailing public opinion. He would show us the naked truth right away, while we are crawling painfully towards it through crisis after crisis. He would say that we have to manage this planet properly for the benefit of all, including future generations. Studying our political system, he would conclude that it is an obsolete mess, totally out of step with the interdependent needs of the planet and of humanity. He would ask, 'Why didn't you continue what

was started in Philadelphia two hundred years ago? Why are you stuck? Why have you removed world political order from your preoccupations? You have no world law. You have no world parliament. You have no world equity. You have no world justice. You have no proper implementation of the global recommendations of your United Nations. You have totally wrong world priorities, spending a trillion dollars a year on planet-endangering arms while bickering about a few hundred million dollars for your indispensable, path-breaking world agencies. This is no way of managing a planet! If an inspection team came from outer-space, they would give you an F – failure – in planetary management. You have a UN, but you maintain, reinforce, and glorify a national ‘sovereignty’ system which renders the UN ineffective. Why don’t you sit down and perfect, update, modernize the constitutional system we started in Philadelphia, extending it to the entire world, or at least to the Americas to start with? What did you do in Philadelphia during the Bicentennial of the US Constitution? You admired it, you glorified it, you had your mouths full of it. You had fireworks but you stopped at that, while the founding fathers would have looked at the entire world.’

My own recommendation, that the best thinkers should be brought together in Philadelphia to draft a constitution for the world, was not heard. A hundred young students, however, have constituted themselves as an association, *Philadelphia 2000*, to work on such a constitution. The gloomy prediction of Thomas Paine about the US and its lack of audacity is becoming true. Thanks God, we have the efforts of Ben Ferencz, a former prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, who wrote a Common Sense manifesto which is being published in a million copies under the title *Planethood* by Ken Keyes, the author of the famous *One Hundredth Monkey*. Ben Ferencz is here with us. The Foreword of his book is being distributed to you.<sup>109</sup>

Thomas Paine would raise another fundamental question: the state of democracy in the world. He would say: ‘How come that you have about sixty to seventy dictatorships – ideological dictatorships, military dictatorships, religious dictatorships? Why do you let democracy be corrupted through alliances between such dictatorships and special interest groups, for instance the merchants of death? Where is the people’s will? Your people elect representatives with the special mandate to reduce or eliminate nuclear armaments and when they are in power they increase such arms! They promise to reduce budget deficits and at

the end of their mandate, the deficit is bigger than before. You stick to national sovereignty in a global world where everything is interdependent, from the air to the waters, from nature to the human species. 'Sovereign' comes from king. You have a royal system of nations! We took the word sovereign away from the kings and gave it to the nation which was the right thing to do at the time. But today you must take it away from the nations and give it to the world and to humanity! You must declare national sovereignty an obsolete dictatorship and replace it by the peoples' sovereignty in a planetary home. You have to do at least for the world what the Europeans did when creating a European Community with supra-national powers. Since 1945 you went to the moon, you unlocked the atom, you performed incredible scientific achievements, but on the political front you produced only two timid advances: the United Nations and the European Community. You are giants in science and technology and pygmies in the political field. The two big powers seem to be sitting on the brains of all humans, preventing them from thinking. They occupy the world scene. I was busy dismantling the empires of the kings and we succeeded. You have new empires to dismantle and to establish a true world democracy of all peoples. Why don't you fight for a revolution in the relations and behavior of the two big powers, between the East and the West? Such groupings should realize that their divisions are harmful to the planet and cannot go on forever.'

If Thomas Paine went to Africa or Asia and saw the conditions in their poor countries, he would exclaim: 'It is unbelievable that such extreme conditions coexist on the same planet. In some parts of your world the people are suffocating in goods to the point that the human person disappears and the goods become all-important. And here people are lying in the streets, empty-handed and hopeless.' He would call not only for a revolution between East and West but also between North and South.

On human rights he would say: 'It is wonderful that you have written such beautiful and numerous additional texts since our 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* during the French Revolution. But how many have been ratified? How many clauses of escape have you tolerated? You have more violations of human rights on this planet than there are sins in hell. Why haven't you established a World Court of Human Rights to protect the individual against abuses by his

government? Do you have a human right of governmental compliance with international treaties and the United Nations Charter? Have you thought of the human rights of future generations? Have you proclaimed the fundamental human right not to kill and not to be killed, not even in the name of a nation?

Liberty having been one of his favorite subjects, he would ask: 'During your celebration of the Centennial of the Statue of Liberty, did you have the courage to raise the question of what liberty means today in your world? No, you refurbished the Statue, you had fireworks, but where was the philosophical discussion of the meaning of liberty in a world of powerful nations, of giant monopolies, of vast news media and advertisements which program the minds, needs, beliefs, and cultures of most of humanity?'

What is *freedom of information*, for example? I have to swallow *The New York Times* every day, but never has *The New York Times* published one of my letters of correction, disagreement, or protest. Where is my freedom, compared with the freedom of *The New York Times* when they publish slander against the United Nations? Just to give you an example: a few weeks ago they published an article on the 'gobbling of paper' by the UN 'paper mill.' A picture was shown of carriages loaded with paper entering the UN. I wrote to them asking them to inform their readers that the total UN documentation in *one year*, in five official languages, dealing with the most important subjects on Earth and never carrying one single advertisement, amounted to *one Sunday edition of The New York Times!* Do you think that they would ever publish such a letter? Margaret Mead, who never got her letters of defense of the UN published either, once suggested that a new newspaper should be launched which would publish the letters of readers rejected by *The New York Times*.

Reading Thomas Paine, I gained the conviction that he was a deeply spiritual person, a cosmic man who tried to find out what life was all about, what his personal cosmic responsibilities were as a human being. At the end of his life, he expressed his belief and contentment that 'he had tried to his best as a human being.' And this is what every human person should be able to say at the moment of death. He would probably say: 'You know so much at this stage of evolution, you should ask yourself a fundamental question, namely, what is life all about? What has God or the cosmos in mind for you on this planet? What do all your efforts and exertions mean? What is your future evolution going to be?

What is the destination of your journey on this miraculous planet in the vast fathomless universe? Why are humans born, why do you live, why do you die? Why does humanity accumulate all these experiences and knowledge? What is the future of this planet going to be?’

And he would probably address himself to the heads of states, especially those of the US and the USSR, and say: ‘You have not only a responsibility towards your people and a responsibility towards the whole of humanity. You have also a responsibility towards God and the cosmos, because it depends upon you whether the cosmic experiment unfolding on this planet will continue or not.’

He would ask for a revolution in education, as Michael Foot did today. He would question us: ‘What do you teach the children in your schools? Are they being taught that the world is their country, their home, and that humanity is their family? No, from all I can see your education starts with the nation and ends with it, as if it were an island floating alone on this planet. National glory, national history, national geography, national literature, national everything, plus the diminishing of other nations, especially competitors or potential enemies. How do you expect to have responsible, non-violent citizens when you glorify and practice your own state violence and ignore the crying needs of the planet and of humanity? With ninety-nine percent of the youth of this planet being programmed in this way, how do you expect a peaceful and better world? You are suffering from illusions.’

He would be thrilled by the news that there is a first supra-national University for Peace located in a country that has constitutionally disarmed itself: Costa Rica. But he would be appalled to learn that the University is left penniless by nations who in the meanwhile pour huge resources in hundreds of military academies. He would think that we are mad.

He would advocate a revolution in the art of living, or the *art of being*, as he called it, revealing how deep his thinking went. He would ask: ‘How come that the vast majority of your people are dissatisfied while your governments think that they are doing so well? Even in your rich countries the constant accumulation of goods and the creation of incessant dissatisfaction to produce more goods has led nowhere. Do you think that God or the cosmos has created humans to pile up goods? In your richest country, the United States, there are twenty million drug addicts! What other proof do you need of your failure to provide

happiness and meaning to the people?’

Thomas Paine would point at the elements and exclaim: ‘Who is representing and speaking for the atmosphere, for the waters, for the seas and oceans, for nature, for all other living species whom you destroy so recklessly?’ He would be greener than the Greens and would surely start a world party of Greens to defend and save the Earth.

He would also ask: ‘Why don’t you have a world budget which would reveal to you what resources are devoted to what, and what colossal waste and distorted priorities there are in the use of the world’s taxpayers’ resources? Where are your plans for great dams, new canals, water and pipelines, and so forth, to improve the economic productivity of this planet, to regreen the deserts, to reforest the wastelands, to conserve your valuable resources? Again, what are these stupid, colossal military expenditures I see pop out of your budgets? Why don’t you start a revolution against them?’

He would speak of the need for a revolution in the relations between the religions. He would ask why they still are the cause and allies of so many conflicts on this planet instead of offering their insights and wisdom to draft the cosmic or divine commandments for the behavior of individuals and institutions, above all nations, in order to uphold the sanctity and sacredness of human life.

I gave the above only as examples of some of the most important needed revolutions that came to my mind, but there are many others. They will occur to you, I am sure, in economics, in philosophy, in sociology, in biology, and so forth. There is scarcely a field of human endeavor which does not require a revolution due to the new global conditions and requirements of our planet.

In conclusion, may I point at a few dates which call for ‘Paineful’ revolutionary rethinking of our human destiny, behavior, and political structure. There will be the Bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989, the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the New World in 1992, and the Bimillennium celebrations in the year 2000. We must seize these occasions to draw conclusions and balance-sheets, to undertake deep, truthful, honest rethinking and revolutions for a better future and evolutionary duty. We go at present from anomaly to anomaly, from crisis to crisis, from accident to accident. This is no longer a proper way for a species that has reached our stage of evolution. I hope that you will leave this Colloquium with the firm determination to become a

*Thomas Paine*

Thomas Paine and to initiate deep-seated revolutions which might seem impossible today but which will all succeed as did those he undertook two hundred years ago against all odds and obstacles, for the good of humanity. May Thomas Paine relive in each of us.