

WHAT MATTERS?

Talk given at the October 2015 Anthroposophical Society Conference at Hawkes Bay, New Zealand by Mark Geard

IN MY VIEW WHAT MATTERS MOST is our sense of humanity. Because to me, understanding what it means to be human, is the great issue we face today. What does it mean to be human? That is what matters, in my opinion. And it is the lack of understanding and awareness of this question that lies at the heart of the great, and formidable issues we face today.

The dictionary says that humanity means *'the state of our being human.'* But this does not get us very far. I went onto the Internet to see what I would find. There were a number of professional blogs that tried to address this issue, and what I found were lots of comments about how bad humans were, how animals were better than humans, or that humans were just animals. The human being is described as the most formidable predator on the planet. With all that is going on in the world today, it is perhaps not surprising that such pessimistic views are so common. Nowhere did the word spirit appear on any of the sites I looked at. Worse, it did not take long on a number of these blogs, that after a few intellectual postings, for the discussions to become personal, and where the bloggers resorted to insulting each other. It seems that it is difficult for us to come to a consensus on what it means to be human and that it is difficult to not become aggressive when meeting a differing viewpoint. We seem to constantly get in the way of ourselves. Is this part of being human?

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To truly understand the nature of being human we have to come to the idea of self-knowledge. As we know, knowing oneself is a very difficult path, yet it is something we must all strive for if we are to come to an understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Nietzsche said that life itself confided a secret to him – *'Behold,'* it said *'I am that which must always overcome itself.'* It is our true nature to strive to overcome, that which is base within us – to perfect ourselves, to realize a higher aspect, a divine aspect of ourselves through a path of self-knowledge. This is part of being human. It has occupied human endeavour for thousands of years.

Steiner comes from such a fresh and different standpoint from the plethora of negative, dry, intellectual comment found today on the internet. He said that to begin to understand what it is to be human requires a deep attitude of reverence in the presence of the essential nature and Being of Man. **REVERENCE!** He said that this attitude must be maintained during such reflections, and that we must disregard what man appears to be in everyday life. We approach the question from a place of veneration! To understand the nature of the human being we have to lift ourselves to the conception that the human being has not evolved for its own sake, but rather to reveal something far higher, a higher divine beingness. Perhaps this sounds strange in today's world. Our striving for self-knowledge, our striving to perfect ourselves, reflects a longing to reveal something far higher. Steiner calls it the World Spirit, that divine intelligence that lives and weaves through all that we know of this earth, this cosmos, and in human beings themselves. Some call it the Buddha nature; others call it the word, the logos or the Christ. We must not lose sight of this higher aspect that is the spiritually creative impulse within all human beings. To fully manifest it within ourselves is what we are here on earth for. It

connects us to all that exist, as we know it in this world, because we are all part of the same creative revelation.

Knowing oneself is to work with a sense of one's individuality in relation to the whole. *Individuality is always in the process of coming to be.* To live into this experience is so important! The closer we can get to this sense of individuality, the more possible it becomes to also experience the world as always in the process of coming to be. The challenge of encountering the world through individuality is to meet the world through what we are coming to be, not just through what we already know. We could say that our past is shining through us from behind. It is what we have become. It is what we know. But what streams to us from out of the future is the desire to change, to transform, to perfect ourselves, to overcome ourselves and realize a divine – higher aspect of ourselves. Past and future meet in the present highly creative 'now'. Change and transformation happen in the now.

I came across some writing by Paul Brunton, a leading Theosophist at the earlier part of the last century, who visited a maharishi in India, and asked him several questions including "What is the way to God-realization?" and the maharishi said, ask yourself "Who am I? Enquire into the nature of yourself"

I would like to mention here that part of my work as an art therapist takes place at Rimutaka prison. The last three years have been a remarkable experience for me. I have learned quite a lot from some of the men there about being human and about change and transformation.

I work with a small team of psychologists in a therapy unit. My work is mainly working one-on-one with inmates in this unit. The men I work with are high level offenders. Many of them live right on the threshold. Some look into the abyss of their own being and courageously face their demons. For some it can be the opening of a door to true self knowledge. They are men who mostly have had horrific childhoods, and I have discovered that numerous of them have had profound spiritual experiences. One man came into my therapy session looking very disturbed and when I asked him what was bothering him, he said that every morning he just looked at himself in the mirror and asked "Who am I? ... Who am I?" This is probably the most absolute question any human can ask, where one confronts one's own authenticity in the light of, and often despite social and environmental circumstances and conditioning.

I like the statement of Georg Kuhlewind who says, 'When a 'great' question really begins to burn, it has the power to draw us along the path, following after it.' I felt strongly in the case of this inmate, that the process of true self-awakening had begun, and that he was already on a path of personal transformation. For this man to come and say in his grief "Who am I" was particularly moving for me, because while it was a time of desperation for him, I could see that there was a huge shift taking place in the way he was meeting himself and the world. All he needed was for someone to say it is ok, it is possible, you are fortunate, it is a key to the doorway of discovering who you truly are, you are in a process of change.

This man was seeking something that was beyond the limitations of his everyday persona. He was in a process of seeking something that would give greater meaning to his existence. He was seeking that part of us that transcends the masks we wear and our ordinary thinking consciousness. The experience of a higher self in us can come at any time, and is often just a flash of awareness of a new sense of self – our true self, encompassed in the words 'I AM'. These two words are imbued with an extraordinary affirmation and presence. Once we have had this experience, we never forget it. Through

meditation we can learn to lengthen those brief I AM moments and make them agents of change in the world. Even simply saying these words out loud, while living into them, can have a powerful centering effect upon us. The poet Rumi, speaks of these moments of realization where one is woken from a dream. In this extract from a poem he says:

*"... So humankind is being led along
an evolving course through this migration
of intelligences, and though we may seem
to be sleeping, there is an inner wakefulness
that directs the dream.
It will eventually startle us back
to the truth of who we are."*

Working with these inmates has made me become deeply interested in the nature of change. What makes people want to change? Working in the prison has helped me move more fully into this question and not rely on a purely intellectual understanding. For some it is the result of personal insights that take place during their therapy sessions. Suffering is usually a companion of change.

I became awake to how important it is to consciously work with that which is a client's impulse and struggle to change. An impulse coming from the future into the 'now.' You may say that all therapists work in this way – and mostly this is true. But for me it was such a strong experience to notice how much could happen and be achieved if I greeted a client as a being with spiritual forces of change, of transformation, streaming from out of the future into the therapy space. This became a living imagination for me rather than a learned modus operandi. I believe that all true moments of change and transformation stream from out of the future from the higher self – the I AM. The higher self works as an impulse into the rigidity of our habitual behaviours through feelings of reverence, compassion, conscience and love.

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During the first session I had with one inmate who is a tough looking ex-gang member, it became clear to me that this man was having spiritual experiences of a kundulini nature. He is very intelligent and consumes whatever books he can get his hands on in terms of personal development. He said to me "I have all these experiences and some knowledge, but what do I do with it – I need to make sense of it?" So he is now working on the six basic soul strengthening exercises and contemplation exercises based on living and non living phenomena. This is about learning soul fitness. Many of these men work out in the prison gym which is good for their physical fitness but building muscle alone, tends to reinforce the 'macho' in them. There is such a need for fitness exercises for the soul as well as physical fitness.

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Part of being human is to have an individual biography. A life story which we have shaped and which has shaped us. Our biography can be seen as a stream of spiritual impulses flowing into us, meeting the stream of worldly events.

The men in this therapy unit have to work on their biography. To look at their lives and also the crimes they have committed. They have to own who they are and what they have done. They have to share this with their group. For many it takes great courage. Almost all have never had to do this before. And their fellow inmates are the best listeners for spotting if someone is not telling the full story, or is hiding some of the facts. These men start to learn that everyone has a story. It is often a deeply emotional and painful experience for them, in which deep shame can arise. It can be very cathartic. They develop a heightened sense of self through this experience. For some it is the first time they have actually truly met themselves. Working on one's biography, can lead to an awareness of the patterns that we are weaving into the fabric of our lives. It is a fabric made up of forces and impulses, some of which come from within our soul, and some of which come from the stream of worldly events. The human being is the place of confluence between these two streams. For some men they can have, what Steiner termed, spirit recollection – a realization, in looking deeply into their lives, of the world wisdom that has brought them to a place of change in their lives. It is a place where conscience can freely arise, that solemn stirring in the soul, that wants to lead us back to the light of our higher self.

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But to change requires efforts of Will to break habitual ways of being. How many of us here are able to do just 10 minutes of meditation a day? Or any developmental exercise for that matter. I am sure all of us believe in self development and will have experienced how difficult it is to 'overcome ourselves' as Nietzsche would have put it. I have a client at the prison who is on a path of self development and change, but not only has he to overcome his habitual ways, and inner laziness as we all do, but he also has to overcome the approbrium of those with whom he associated before he went to prison, and also many of those who are now with him in prison. He has to draw on real depths of courage. He used to be the go-to-guy when things needed to be done. He told me he didn't want that any more. He wanted people to see him for whom he really is. He refused to help his own family members when his brother was in trouble with another gang. He could have organized 'protection' for his brother from within the prison. He said, "I'm not doing it any more. if I don't change, nothing will change". When a fellow gang member gave him the gang hand sign in the prison yard, he refused to respond in kind. All of this takes great courage and conviction. There is absolutely no difference between this man's inner path to truly know himself, breaking the mould, and us here at this conference. Perhaps there is a difference in that his personal safety may be at risk.

Working with these prison inmates has heightened my awareness of how change processes sit so closely to self confrontation, pain, conscience, feelings of shame and regret, as we experience in ourselves something of what we could be, are meant to be, and through the courage to change, can be. It is so human to feel these stirrings, and know that they are a gift and have their source in our higher self – the light of our I consciousness that faithfully strives to wake us from our enchantment.

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Part of being human is our relationship to beauty. In some ways you could say we have lost this relationship. Talking about beauty is not fashionable now. But cultivating beauty is part of what I call

our soul fitness. The dictionary defines fitness as *the quality of being suitable to fulfill a particular role or task*. To be emotionally intelligent so that we can undertake our life-tasks in a truly human way, we need to seek the transformative power of beauty. I don't want to get into semantics about what is beauty, and the whole debate about beauty being in the eye of the beholder, but rather to say that if we start with nature, we will come to actual experiences of what we could say is a true encounter with beauty. Why is having such encounters important? From my own experience I can say that living into, for example, a beautiful sunset opens out my being, it expands my soul, I move outwards from the heart. Our experience of beauty won't tell us who we are in our inner most being, that must come from within, but it will take us to a threshold, it will open our heart forces and sensitize our aesthetic sense. This sensitizing develops a capacity for what Steiner calls the 'tenderness' that one requires for perceiving subtle spiritual experiences that we all can have.

I worked with an inmate who had spent many years in jail. As a child he had been made to eat all his meals outside with the chained up dog. He had to eat the same food as the dog. He told me the dog was the only thing he trusted in his life and that if the dog didn't eat the food, nor would he. He told me the dog was the best friend he ever had. It never let him down. This inmate didn't trust anyone and kept largely to himself. The psychologists found him closed and not forthcoming in their group sessions and had asked me to see if I could help him to become more open and to communicate more: to trust. I sometimes used meditation to relax him along with simple drawing exercises and then into working with colour which is so useful to expand the life of feelings. During one session I got him to work with blue and yellow. Yellow coming down the page from the top and blue moving up from the bottom. He worked very quietly with great concentration, which was normally very difficult for him. When the two colours met – blue into yellow, a beautiful green appeared. He looked astonished and delighted. I encouraged him to continue and gradually the green became hills, the blue a lake and the yellow, with touches of red and orange, a sunset. While looking at the picture when he had finished, he became quiet and emotional and said he couldn't believe he had created something so beautiful. He said it was the most beautiful thing he had ever done. He then became silent and sad and when I asked him what he was feeling he said that he didn't deserve such an experience. I reminded him that his experience of beauty in creating the picture had come from within him and was part of him, buried away, waiting to be awoken. In the ensuing weeks this man's whole demeanor changed. He began interacting with others in the yard, and according to a psychologist, was more positive in his group therapy sessions. He would come into my therapy room and describe the colour of the sky he had seen the previous day, and so on. At last he seemed more connected to the world.

For me it was another reminder of the importance of beauty in our lives and its healing power. In today's culture we have largely lost this openness to experiences of beauty where we can feel awe, wonder, connectedness, and openness. Experiences of beauty can take us to a threshold and sometimes over it to a place of illumination and change.

How do we define what is beauty? We can know if it is truly beautiful if it draws us closer to our humanity; If we are lifted through this experience to a heightened sense of revelation – experiencing ourselves intrinsically part of the whole of existence. We can become more human through beauty. We are drawn out of our selves and become connected to a far greater reality. Steiner says that an actual experience of beauty is an experience of the world of spirit within earthly reality. Let me give you an example of this through a work of art.

You may know of Leonardo da Vinci's painting of The Madonna of the Rocks. He painted several versions of this. They depict the Virgin Mary, the Jesus child and the infant John the baptist, along with an angel being. They are sitting surrounded amongst a vast rocky landscape. It is a rather bizarre setting, yet incredibly inspired. We become aware of a tenderness, not just between those of this group, but also of a different kind of tenderness – the delicate nature of human flesh against the opaque density and jagged hardness of rock. If we live into this juxtaposition we can feel elevated in our imaginative life and experience human vulnerability, yet astonishing 'beingness' – of spirit dwelling in flesh. We can feel the animating spirit in these bodies, which seen against the rocky landscape, seem so exposed, yet so wonderfully open to the universe. Human skin is really such a thin boundary between self and other. This painting does not just concern divine players in an earthly setting, but rather ourselves too in this landscape, and the miracle of our own existence. To live into beauty can elevate us to a heightened sense of being human.

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Can we really deny that there is a lack of awareness for the need for more beauty in our lives? Do people really take the time to experience beauty, be it nature, a great work of art etc. I visited the Louvre gallery two years ago and was shocked to see how the seething mass of people in those vast halls were more interested in getting selfies in front of masterpieces than to actually spend time looking at these paintings – actually having an experience. It was very disturbing and sad.

Our outward behaviour is a mirror of our inner state of being. The behaviour of so many in the Louvre seemed to reflect total self absorption. It was not about the great works of humanity but rather their commodification and possession, without any personal connection. It was an inability to actually be present.

Yes, our outward behaviour is a mirror of our inner state of being. We constantly hear about the environmental crisis. Through our outward behaviour in the world our life sustaining bio systems are suffering as never before. I suggest to you that this is directly connected to our loss of understanding of what it means to be truly human. Outer pollution is a symptom of an inner pollution, an inner sickness. We all know that human activity is pouring carbon dioxide into the atmosphere much faster than plants and oceans can absorb it. So basically the earth, what we sometimes call in a more feeling and reverential way, Mother Earth, is being overwhelmed, she is suffering, and she is collapsing.

You might say what could matter more than this!

The elements – earth, water, air and warmth are after all an extension of our physical body, an extension of our breathing process, an extension of our bio-rhythms, nature is that which visually and mentally nourishes us, stimulates us, brings beauty to us. The earth too is a living being. How is it that we have lost sight of this? I mean this in the deepest sense. We can think it, but that is very different from having a genuine experience of it.

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For thousands of years Mankind has lived in the knowledge and experience of having come from a

spiritual realm, and of returning to it after death. Societies were shaped through this relationship and it informed all aspects of life, providing overarching archetypes for human aspirations, behaviour and development. Knowledge of what it meant to be human was clearly articulated through the great leaders of humanity who felt divinely inspired. This unbroken link to the spirit began to fracture with the unfolding of the industrial revolution. The birth of printing for example, with moveable type, allowed the mass production of identical objects, that were seen by some at the time as some kind of work of the devil. Can you imagine, living in those times and seeing bibles, all identical for the first time? We are used to this, however there was a time when nothing in the world was identical! The maker and their product had always been closely bound. The product revealed something of the maker. The product had always revealed the maker's humanness and subtle inconsistencies. The industrial revolution heralded the burgeoning of an astonishing intellectual outpouring directed at technological invention and scientific discovery, which has changed society and human soul life in a staggering way. We have reaped enormous rewards through these developments. However, in the process we have largely lost sight of the image of the human being as a transcendent spiritual being. We seem to be lost in the speed and dazzle of technical innovation.

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While self-overcoming through change has been intrinsic to human development, human transcendence, and self-mastery through efforts of will, suffering and insight – the idea of self-overcoming has now been re-envisioned, re-contextualized and adopted by some who are in the thrall of technology as the answer to personal transformation, and who promote what is known as Transhumanism. They believe that new technologies will allow us to become '*Who we really are.*'

They believe that 'Human enhancement technologies', can be used for not only treating illnesses and disabilities but also for enhancing human capacities through the convergence of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science and so on. They see that neural implants and brain-computer interfaces will allow us to have enormous performance capability. They believe in the rights of citizens to have freedom of choice to either maintain or modify their own minds and bodies, and those of their children, through these technologies. Their vision is called Singularity– many of you will be aware of this term, in which our intelligence will become increasingly nonbiological and trillions of times more powerful than it is today. They see it as a dawning of a new civilization that will enable us to transcend our biological limitations and amplify our capabilities and creativity. Roland Bailey, a leading science correspondent, wrote that it is a movement that epitomizes the most daring, courageous, imaginative, and idealistic aspirations of humanity. Oxford Philosophy Professor Nick Bostrom likes to link the ideas and ideals of Transhumanism back to Gilgamesh and his quest for immortality.

In 2009, Max Moore, an English philosopher and futurist and leading proponent of Transhumanism, gave a lecture to a Catholic conference titled '*The idea of earthly immortality: a new challenge for theology.*' Moore says that he is inspired by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas for their positions on the compatibility of faith and reason, and argues that Catholics should have a favourable attitude to Transhumanism and the greatly extended maximum life-spans that will soon be possible. He argues that because Catholic theologians, being great defenders of the sacredness of life, should

see the compatibility of theology with transhumanism's core striving for agelessness, or physical immortality. He says that degenerative ageing and involuntary death are mortal enemies. He goes on to say that an extended life can be seen as a divine blessing: an extended opportunity to improve ourselves, do good works to redeem ourselves, to glorify God and to more fully earn a place in Heaven. So, in his view, the longer we live the more time we have to perfect ourselves and do good in the world. One can feel shades of Mephistopheles in this hyperbole.

In the 1940's C.S.Lewis warned of the dangers of human enhancement through Eugenics, pre-natal conditioning and new methods in education, and felt that the question would soon be asked: why should our species be preserved? Why not design and create a different species that is smarter, more powerful and longer lasting than humans? After all, if humankind stands in the way of progress, what is the point of being human? Lewis concluded, *'Man's final conquest has proved to be the abolition of man.'*

The futurologist Ray Kurzweil, now director of engineering at Google, anticipates a time when, by merging their minds with the much greater artificial intelligence that they have created in computers, and uploading the result into cyberspace, human beings will cease to be biological organisms. Eventually, he believes, these post-human minds may coalesce into a super-mind, godlike in its powers and potentially immortal.

But the future in many ways is already here and neural brain implants have already achieved some very interesting results with telepathic communication between two human beings having been achieved.

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It seems to me that we need to be reminded that life is not a struggle for the survival of the fittest, but rather a struggle to become spiritually fit.

Many ideas and seductive promises that are fed to us about the latest scientific and technical achievements that are going to change us and the way we live, seem to promise such a synthetic and abstract relationship in terms of understanding oneself and our relationship to others and the world. They seem a far cry from what I perceive and experience in terms of true human development, which has certainly been highlighted for me through working with the men at Rimutaka prison. There is a raw realism, rather than illusion, in what some of these men go through. It involves struggles that are fought and won, and sometimes lost, through the triumph and often heartbreak of the soul trying to overcome itself and realise its own truth. Life and the struggle to be human is a gloriously messy unpredictable business, uniquely individual to each of us. It is the path we all have to walk for authentic human change, growth, and development.

I am not a scientist and I can't possibly keep up with the vast array of technical innovations that are encapsulating our lives and the way we live. But I have been given, as we all have, through my spiritual birthright, the capacity for self-transformation, and the enhancement of my powers of thinking, feeling and of willing. We all have latent spiritual organs within us that can be developed through resolute inner-work, through the experience of seeing ourselves, not in isolation to our fellow human beings, not in isolation to the needs of the world, not as competitors climbing over others to become more intelligent and powerful, but through pictures of the true human being, through the

lens of reverence, humility, suffering, compassion and love. Machines and synthetic technologies are an intrinsic part of our lives, and rightly so. They offer great gifts but need to be used wisely because it seems as a species; we are struggling to make sense of ourselves. This is why understanding what it is to be a human being is so critically needed in our time.

The true path for human enhancement is not through merging the human brain with the computing power of machines, through synthetic brain implants, but rather through self-mastery and personal transformation. We must direct these technologies out of the highest moral authority of the human I. The forces of opposition to true human development are relentless; therefore it is incumbent upon us to be resolute in our pursuit of self-knowledge. If we are not to be submerged, we need to become more aware of our nascent capacity for spiritual development as the authentic path for so called 'enhancement'.

In his book on meditation written many years ago, Friedrich Rittelmeyer attributes a central role to the education of the will. He says, "The 'I' is active in the will. A strong will is a powerful protection against the overwhelming impact of life around us and against the inner weakness of our nervous system. The more life threatens us from the outside, the more we must learn to be active from within."

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The meditative path is the highest activity for self-development and consciousness- raising. Meditation is not about escaping from the world but rather where we enter more coherently into it. Of course not everyone wants to meditate, and many seek other ways of expressing higher human attributes. But meditation is a refined pathway to direct spiritual encounter with the creative forces and agencies that are the foundation of the universe. It is important to state here that meditation seen rightly, is not only about 'self' but also 'service'. Through meditation, insights and discoveries can help us grow spiritually, but this growth must be placed as loving service to the world. In the act of meditating we loosen and free ourselves from the narrow bonds of our personality and self-centredness. We become more universal and aware of ourselves being intimately woven within creative world processes. Through meditation we come to experience the essence of what lies behind the appearance of physical and non-physical phenomena. Through the sensitizing processes of meditation and its awakening powers, we are given tools to help orientate ourselves amidst the confusion and illusions of life, so that we can recognize and truly understand the forces that help and hinder human development.

Through meditation we are drawn closer to our true self – the higher self – to the experience of the 'I AM'. This experience can make us feel that we are truly living in the creative forces that are shaping the world.

When our ego becomes aware of it's higher-self we have an experience of a human archetype that is both our higher individual self and a universal world-self that connects all human beings through compassion, conscience and selfless love. This is the 'I AM' experience. No longer are we a 'me' but rather an I that encompasses all humanity. It is like a seed within an apple – the seed is an individual entity within the apple, yet intrinsically one with the whole, and contains the whole within itself. These qualities are far beyond the compass of technology and the vision of a post-human existence envisioned by transhumanism or singularity. The only outcome of a technologically enhanced human

is the brutalisation of the human being, and the destruction of our I – our higher-self. Meditation is an ameliorating counter force against our plunge into a synthetic existence.

I recently took a person through a visualisation – a simple meditation for relaxation and peace. In this process a beautiful garden is described in the mind. Afterwards, she said in astonishment “*You know, I had forgotten that I have the capacity to imagine*”. Unfortunately, I think this is common today. People are forgetting that they can imagine for themselves, and not just be regurgitating images from the media which rise up from their sub-conscious.

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If we look at the world today it is as if we are lost in a vast shady forest. Many millions are struggling to simply stay alive in this wilderness, while others have fallen asleep through some strange enchantment. But a pathway through the woods has already been cut for us, but do we have the eyes to see it? And although the terrain is rugged and demanding, do we have the will to walk it, and the trust to know it will take us to be where we need to be?

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Many in the world, who suffer terrible hardship, may not have the luxury of freely chosen self development as we do, but do we not therefore have a responsibility to take every opportunity to make the fruits of our spiritual knowledge become deeds, however we are able, for the service of the world and humankind? Are we doing enough? I don't think so. Not nearly enough. Each of us has to be active in our spiritual work in some way – it can't be a hobby. If we are already active, then can we do more? As Nicanor Perlas said, “*The world is on fire!*”

So what are each of us going to do?

The impulse for change is streaming from out of the future into the present now. Right now!

So what are you going to do?