

THE EARTH CRIES OUT, AND ASKS FOR PEACE

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Friends:

As I approach this stage, I follow in the footsteps of a magnificent man who himself follows in the footsteps of one of the greatest men in the history of humanity, Mahatma Gandhi. It is never easy to follow in the footsteps of people like these: the path is steep and full of obstacles; the route is long and absolutely exhausting; the effort is infinite and at times insufficient. So why do we do it? Because we must. Something deep down inside us shouts that we must follow this man who took the poorest people from the poorest cities and put a bank at their service. Something deep down inside us shouts that we must follow this man who showed the world what it means to use talent and knowledge to help others. Something deep down inside us shouts that we must follow this man who was able to prove that peace also comes in the form of a roof, water and bread.

For me, it is an honor to approach this stage, following in the footsteps of Dr. Muhammad Yunus, and I'll take advantage of this opportunity to thank him for joining us today at this university named Earth and on this part of the Earth named Costa Rica. I think that few people could possibly be more inspiring to a new graduate than Dr. Yunus because he, more than anyone else, has taught us to bring the university into reality. You all have this beautiful campus, he had the streets of his community. You all have these professors, he had the citizens of his country. Soon, you all will have a diploma in your hands, a diploma like the one he received some years ago. Today, I want to ask you if you dare to follow in his footsteps.

I am confident that the answer is 'yes'. This institution has always given me hope. For many years, EARTH has given to Costa Rica, and the world, extraordinary agronomy professionals; marvelous citizens concerned about the environment and sustainable development. This piece of the Earth here in Limón sends me a clear message: there is no reason to feel defeated. Hundreds, thousands of men and women learn every day about the importance of producing without destroying, of living without using-up the sources of life.

All of us have referred at some time to our university as our "*alma mater*"—this Latin expression captures a significance that is at once simple and powerful, elemental and true: the university is our "nourishing mother", she who feeds us and takes care of us, educates us and makes us who we are. In your case, this is a very literal expression: here, you truly have the Earth—the universal mother—as a school. The men and women who receive their diploma from EARTH today are not graduating solely from the school that taught them botany or educated them about chemistry, but also from the great mother who bathed them with her rain and covered them with her trees, who kissed their feet with her humid earth and embraced them with the hum of cicadas and the wing-beats of butterflies. During the four years that you were here, your growth was nurtured by the Earth's lifeblood, you learned to work the land and harvest its fruits. Now is the

moment that you will begin to take care of your “alma mater”. As this institution’s song goes: *“We are the Earth’s children / its destiny is in our hands / we fight for her, we live for her / EARTH is the beginning of the path”*. You, Earth’s children, leave today to fight for her. It will not be an easy job, but you have to start somewhere.

EARTH’s song also reminds us that: *“The Earth, cries out / the Earth, is saddened / it is debilitated day by day / because it is being contaminated... The weeping bird calls to us / the forest is dying / as is the countryside”*. Unfortunately, this will also be part of the reality that you face when you leave here. The Earth cries out and asks for peace, peace in every sense of the word. In many regions of the world—including our region—just 20 years ago, peace meant the absence of armed conflict. Today it is clear that the elimination of this kind of conflict is always a fundamental achievement for anyone who wants a better future for the planet. But it is also clear that peace takes on many forms because violence takes on many forms: the violence that kills forcefully with a gun, and the violence that kills little by little with starvation; the violence that kills forcefully with hate, and the violence that kills little by little with indifference; the violence that kills forcefully with a bomb, and the violence that kills little by little with carbon.

While a family in Bangladesh can break the cycle of poverty with a loan of 22 cents, in the rest of the world, more than one trillion dollars is spent each year on armies and soldiers. This is nothing more than violence. Thousands of people die every day due to preventable diseases. This is nothing more than violence. The temperature of the planet is increasing, acid rain falls from the sky like bullets due to the emission of carbon that we send up like missiles from the Earth. This is nothing more than violence.

I have noticed that Dr. Yunus and I share the same year of birth, and that we both graduated from national universities in the 1960s and crossed oceans to study in far away lands. I can’t avoid thinking that the world that each of you inherit today is not very different from the world that Dr. Yunus and I received when we graduated. There are some things that have, unfortunately, remained the same. In 1961, John F. Kennedy said that for the first time in history, *“man has in his mortal hands the power to abolish every kind of human poverty”*. Since then, humanity has had the power to change, but it has not done so. In time immemorial, our species first experienced the brutal consequences of war and weapons. Since then, our species has had the power to change, but it has not done so. For a few decades now, scientists have been warning us that the [negative impact of the] damage we have been inflicting on the environment is both unavoidable and irreversible. Since then, we have had the power to change, but we have not done so. We have had knowledge, but we have lacked will. And this is the disgrace of all humanity.

Fortunately, there are still people who understand the value of taking action; there are still people who refuse to accept that certain ghosts will pursue us throughout eternity. Our distinguished guest is one of these people. Dr. Yunus has said, *“poverty does not exist in civilized societies. Its appropriate place is in a museum”*. His dream is that in 50 years, poverty will be something school children learn about in an exhibit, and they will be filled with disbelief and horror that their ancestors could be so cruel.

This is an idea that could change the world, and it is an idea that Costa Rica knows something about. Our country understands the power of willingness when it is time to confront what is considered obvious and necessary, despite the fact that it is difficult to do so. In 1948, we were able to eliminate an institution that up until then was considered to be inevitable: the military. Since that time, the military's headquarters has been converted into a museum. For more than 50 years, our children have grown up without the shadow of military service over their school books, and they know that if they ever see a soldier's uniform, it will be because they visited our National Museum.

Dear young people:

Many of you have heard the famous phrase dedicated to us by the ex-president of Uruguay, Julio María Sanguinetti: *"Wherever there is a Costa Rican, no matter where, there is liberty"*. I don't think I exaggerate when I tell you that wherever there is an EARTH graduate, no matter where, there will be hope, hope for peace. In 1989, the first stone of this university was laid, but the first stone of the construction of a more just, cleaner and greener planet was also laid. Today, you all leave here to place your own first stone in some part of the world. I ask that you please use that stone to build the foundation of a future museum: the foundation of the museum of poverty; the foundation of the museum of preventable disease; the foundation of the museum of intolerance; the foundation of the museum of ignorance.

I would like to leave you with the words once written by the poet Rabindranath Tagore:

"Don't allow me to pray for refuge from danger, rather to not fear danger when I confront it. Don't allow me to beg for my pain to be alleviated, rather for the heart to conquer my pain. Don't allow me to seek alliances in the battlefield of life, rather to seek my own strength. Don't allow me to flee."

My brave young people, don't allow yourselves to flee. Before you are your paths, and before you are also footsteps. Dare to walk your path.

Thank you very much.