

# Global Wisdom: The Antidote to Magical Thinking

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## Introduction

IN an era of magical thinking where one's unsubstantiated beliefs are applied to current and future events, let us choose to be wise. Let us choose to step into the storm and brave the fierceness of the torrential rain and wind. And let us trust, that when the storm passes, knowing that another will come, we will be better prepared to protect those we love, those we do not know, and ourselves.

March 2020 brought upon us, metaphorically speaking, a fierce storm — the COVID-19 pandemic. In Japan, my country of residence, just as the academic year came to a close, commencement ceremonies were being canceled, schools were being closed, flights were being redirected, and face masks and toilet paper were sold out in the supermarkets. From the critical to the mundane, our lives were altered suddenly. The beginning of this storm was fierce and abrupt, and together with my students at Soka University, Japan, we weathered it. Some of my students remained here in Japan while others who had gone back to their home countries, were anticipating a return to Japan to begin the new academic year on April 1st.

The fierceness of the COVID-19 storm presented innumerable challenges to daily life and forced a redefinition of ourselves, our work, and our collective future. When one anticipates a major life change, there is usually time to plan, to say goodbyes, to envision the challenges of the transition, and to prepare. This storm did not allow for this careful planning, and it brought such immediate restrictions that fragile, temporary solutions emerged, representing the best thinking in the moment but turning out to be unsustainable over time. The American Psychological Association's poll indicated that 63 percent of survey respondents said that their lives had forever changed because of COVID-19, while 77 percent of young adults (18–25 years) felt that the pandemic had stolen major life moments that could never be replaced.<sup>1</sup>

Within months of the pandemic, rents appeared in the fabric of

society. Increased attention to movements across the globe such as the MeToo Movement and Black Lives Matter, launched an audible discourse on bias and exclusion, and the voices of women and people of color, rose above the din. The violence and injustice occurring in the United States exposed vulnerabilities worldwide. While numerous wicked problems were exposed at the beginning of the 2020 pandemic, the two issues of gender inequity and racism highlighted major areas of concern. These two issues will be featured in this article as concrete examples of the need to approach life differently in the new world. I use the term ‘a new world’ intentionally because the pandemic positioned humanity at a crossroads, an opportunity for a new trajectory. Returning to what was considered normal in the past is impossible. To attempt to do so is magical thinking. In this article, I will propose that stepping away from magical thinking and being guided by global wisdom will necessitate a reimagining of coexistence, power, and leadership.

In his 2022 Peace Proposal, *Transforming Human History: The Light of Peace and Dignity*, Daisaku Ikeda describes the need to reweave the social fabric.<sup>2</sup> This reconstruction of society would benefit, says Ikeda, from a reworking and redefinition of values. Ikeda suggests that building on Makiguchi’s view, Ikeda’s mentor and the progenitor of value-creating pedagogy, the value of relationships must intentionally be placed at the center of our human compass. Relationships, the value of human life, dignity, and interdependence must prove to be our True North on humanity’s compass. This compass is needed as we seek to chart our way forward. The pandemic impacted individuals, communities, workplaces, and governments, and there is pressure to return to the familiar, to return to the past, even with all its problems. This storm provides — no, demands — that we learn from the past, and look to the future, for the unfathomable possibilities of co-creating the world we desire, perhaps not for us, but for future generations.

### **A Renaissance**

To hold a space for imagining new possibilities is the work required of us today, as we stand at the crossroads of humanity. A renaissance is upon us — do we fear it and step back into darkness or do we trust ourselves and move forward into the unknown? Do we move forward casting light on what was made visible during these past over two years of the pandemic or do we turn off the light, choosing instead to cling to magical, wishful thinking? Magical thinking would have us believe that if the light does not shine on the problem, and issues remain in the dark, maybe they will cease to exist. Shining the light will require that

we hold a place for the pain, the angst, the fear, and the loss. It will also necessitate that in that space we cradle hope, perseverance, and joy. Because we must trust that this is all possible.

We have a decision to make: Magical thinking blinded by fear, or a renaissance supported by global wisdom, courage, and trust. I trust that we can co-create a society that sustains human dignity. I trust that individuals, families, and communities have the capacity and wisdom to chart a new course. I trust that the accelerated disruption, loss, and trauma, can serve as an opening, revealing tremendous capacity for love and compassion, and the drive to do better, to be better.

Vincent Harding, a mentor of mine and dialogue partner of Ikeda's, was an active participant in the freedom movement in the United States, alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. Harding would often remark, "I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist." In the Harding-Ikeda dialogue, published in a book titled, *America Will Be! Conversations on Hope, Freedom, and Democracy*, these peacemakers described with hope and optimism, the possibilities of not only imagining a more inclusive society, but a beloved community that embraced and was strengthened by the vast differences we each hold.<sup>3</sup> This belief in humanity's capacity to do better was not magical thinking. It was belief built on and driven by a deep, heartfelt commitment to the tremendous goodness of every human being.

While COVID-19 has ripped the fabric of society, our unfathomable capacity to love and care for each other, and build a better world, can be the catalyst for stepping out of the darkness, immersed in the possibilities of this renaissance, our 21st-century renaissance. Would it be easy? Certainly not. Would it be frightening? Of course. This daunting work will only be possible because we know too much, care too much, and want better than to compromise our future. Our children, the children to be born in the future, it is their spirit that is guiding us now. We learn who we are by how others perceive us. How then will the future, our future, perceive us?

### **A Journey with My Students**

As I traveled through this storm of COVID-19 with my students, I saw the world through their eyes and learned so much from them. I recognized that young people are being viewed as present and future leaders. However, while the current world leaders package global solutions in the garb of sustainable development goals (SDGs), climate change movements, and peace strategies, students are left to consider which crisis appeals to their own set of interests. Furthermore, as

undergraduates, they are busy taking classes, participating in school clubs, working part-time, job hunting, and questioning/ discovering who they are. Students express angst over how the pandemic is impacting their daily life choices, with little discourse on what their role is or will be in shaping a better future. Discussion of the future is abstract and distant. Their focused attention span only serves them in the immediate moment. Yet, they are talked about as future leaders in a world they will be responsible for guiding and rescuing, almost as external participants.

We need different solutions for the co-creation of a better, sustainable world. I would posit that our engagement with the youth must also be different. We cannot expect different results with the same inputs. Magical thinking has anesthetized us into believing that the young future leaders will be different and will do different, without any meaningful and intentional intervention. Research reveals that each generation does emerge with a different mindset, ranging from different purchasing patterns to valuing a different core or purpose. While Baby Boomers were defined by the attainment of financial stability, current Gen Zers are looking for purpose in their lives.

### **The Antidote**

If magical thinking is the toxin and I would suggest that it is, then we must find the antidote. Magical thinking leads us to believe that the next generation of leaders will lead better based on hopes and wishes. Magical thinking leads us to believe that after a pandemic we can return to the old normal. Magical thinking leads us to believe that solutions exist outside of ourselves, similar to the fairy tales where one is rescued by a knight in shining armor.

Wisdom is the antidote to magical thinking. Wisdom is needed, both individual and collective, to chart a new path or, as Ikeda eloquently states, to weave a new fabric of society.<sup>4</sup> This collective global wisdom will be defined and guided by purpose. A refined purpose of coexistence, power, and leadership. Coexistence relies on reimagining possibilities of how to be in community, where our best self can emerge and thrive. Power, shared power, is at the heart of democracy and global citizenship. The reimagined purpose of power will be fundamental to how inclusion and belonging emerge from equity and diversity. What will be the purpose of power? I would propose that a new purpose for power would be to construct global citizenship for the greater good. The practice of leadership, as opposed to the sole reliance on positional leadership, must foster the emergence of agency, collective good, and an environment where all can thrive.

As young individuals work to chart their path, how can global wisdom support, encourage, and nurture them? Can global wisdom connect and create? To attempt to answer these questions, the themes of coexistence, power, and leadership will be presented here, intersecting with student voices, experiences, and present-day thinking. By infusing the article with a student perspective, my goal is to present a first-hand narrative of challenges and possibilities. After presenting the three themes, I will conclude with a vision of a future shaped by global wisdom.

## 1. Creative Coexistence

We must learn to live with one another without crushing each other's spirit, being diminished, or left voiceless and invisible. As human beings, we yearn to be seen, to be acknowledged, and to be in community. This practice of valuing one another and recognizing that who I am depends on you, and who you are is dependent on me is *ubuntu*. The *ubuntu* concept of 'I am because we are and we are because I am', captures a spirit of interdependence.<sup>5</sup> This spirit is needed if a coexistence that is mutually valuing of our dignity is to be achieved.

Daisaku Ikeda presents the importance of a creative coexistence, supporting an engaged interdependence, actively creating value for oneself and others.<sup>6</sup> This concept embraces a deeper meaning than just being respectful of one another. It begins with respect and honoring of one's dignity, and then moves forward to the site of praxis. How can we best put into action these beliefs and values? How can creative coexistence become an internalized habit, like exercise or healthy eating? The health and well-being of humanity depend on it.

And yet, with the storm of COVID-19, coexistence became restricted. Within 24 months, Tokyo experienced four states of emergency. The pandemic introduced social distancing which was a call for physical distancing. Unfortunately, the social distance soon represented both physical and emotional distance. The emotional distance resulted from states of emergency, as well as emergency online education, and work from home. Students taking university classes online shared their isolation, distress, and sadness at being unable to physically interact with friends and classmates. Health crises emerged from virus infections leading to thousands of deaths and economic despair began to further fray the fabric of young lives.

The upheaval of COVID-19 revealed the disparities, inequities, and absence of justice in a wide range of communities and entire nations. Dehumanizing acts of violence and injustice separated people and

deepened crude stereotypes held of the ‘other’. Ikeda posits that our lives depend on others, but it must be a relationship of respect, honor, and trust.<sup>7</sup> While the acts, policies, and beliefs of discrimination and injustice have been created both by design and default, at the current crossroads there is a decision to be made. Do we want to continue perpetuating past biases, or will we consciously move toward creating a more just world by design?

The pandemic disrupted life schedules and life spaces. I would suggest that it also disrupted the power relationships that drive and sustain the diminishing of others. Our challenge is to now discover an approach that will allow us to emerge from this disruption. Civil Rights leader James Lawson recounts a childhood story.<sup>8</sup> As a young black boy, another child hurled racial slurs at him and in anger he hit the offending child. When he reached home, hoping to be praised by his mother for defending himself, his mother simply stated, “There must be a better way.” These words served as a compass for Lawson and his deep commitment to nonviolence was sparked. These words can also serve as our compass on this journey to creatively coexist with one another, by design and not by default, in a better way. A better way for understanding and experiencing the transformation that is required of us personally, and the transformation needed in society as well. A better way for committing to a practice of coexistence. We know better. We can do better.

### **Human Solidarity**

As Mandela once said, human solidarity needs to be the central value of our existence. Mandela’s rationale was, “There is still too much discord, hatred, division, conflict, and violence in our world here at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A fundamental concern for others in our individual and community lives would go a long way in making the world the better place we so passionately dreamt of.”<sup>9</sup> These efforts will require the emergence of a new way of being. On its own, the concept of human solidarity feels impersonal and distant. I agree with the concept but what will it take to get there? Practical wisdom would suggest we need to be at the right place, with the right person, in the right situation, to make the most of intentional, purposeful action.<sup>10</sup> Good thoughts do not automatically become purposeful action. To be able to name and embrace one’s purpose and intention will therefore be necessary.

Racism, discrimination, and bias must be attended to with purpose and intentionality. It is insufficient to definitively declare we are not

racist and believe in the dignity of all life, if we are not simultaneously taking action in all facets of our lives to personally transform and dismantle the systems that continue to perpetuate this process of dehumanization. It begins with individual transformation, recognizing that individual actions will and must push families, communities, and systems to find a better way. The joy of being alive, as shared by Ikeda, is connected to purpose,<sup>11</sup> a theme also resonating strongly in positive psychology.<sup>12</sup> Cultivating purpose gives meaning to experiences.

This work of creative coexistence becomes real when we begin to personalize it and commit to being change agents for a better solution. After the latest mass school shooting in the US, in June 2022, where 19 children were killed in Uvalde, Texas, social media posts clearly stated in frustration that no more thoughts and prayers were needed, instead it was time to take action. We need changes in policy, we need to become intolerant of acts that rob us of our dignity and some of their lives. DePrince offers a four-step process for how to translate thoughts and prayers into action.<sup>13</sup> The four steps are to *think*, *connect*, *act*, and *reflect*. Ikeda also has proposed sharing elements to build momentum toward social change that advances peace.<sup>14</sup> His three elements are a *shared sense of purpose*, a *shared sense of responsibility*, and *shared fields of action*. While Ikeda's elements were proposed as suggestions to strengthening the United Nation's activities, these elements could also intersect with DePrince's four steps. The important point is that we must begin to act. Social change requires shared interests, and shared interests are based on individuals first identifying their own personal interests.

While learning from the Uvalde shooting may seem distant and a problem for the US, we are never very far away from our own challenges of creative coexistence. In June 2022, there was a threat posted on social media in my city, warning of an assault on a female between 7:00 p.m. and midnight. The threat was taken seriously by law enforcement and warnings were issued to stay indoors and, if possible, not to walk alone. The university canceled evening campus activities and sent students home after their last class. The next day, on campus, I asked students to share their reactions to the threat from the previous evening. Female students responded immediately, sharing their frustration and fear at being a target of this threat of violence. One female student's response moved us all when she shared, "This is when I hate being female."<sup>15</sup> These acts of violence and experiences of feeling invisible are dehumanizing and are a violation of one's person. Therefore, we must draw on our wisdom, our collective wisdom, to discern the gravity of the situation, to allow voices to be heard, and



to act. Thoughts and prayers may signal good intention, and yet feel ineffectual.

### **Critical Conversations**

Ikeda suggests that we bridge the divide between us, and to this end, critical conversations are needed.<sup>16</sup> These conversations, both critical and courageous, are an opportunity to reveal the paradox and tension. Creating spaces for *conversation* and *dialogue* to occur is an action step; however, it is important to differentiate the two terms. Conversation is a transactional exchange of words. Basically, it is like a game of ping pong: you talk, I talk, you talk, I talk, and so on. Dialogue, on the other hand, is an experience of transformation, where the purpose and intention is to listen, to understand. To listen with one's heart, not with the purpose of replying or asking questions but with the purpose of understanding the other person. To understand is to begin to know the other, and if I know you, that then will connect with how I know myself.

Additionally, dialogue is personal and transformational. Conversation is an exchange and is transactional. To confuse the two and call conversation a dialogue is a disservice to the power of dialogue. While dialogue is often suggested as the first step in getting to know the other, if it is confused with conversation, the possibility of transformation is greatly diminished. Creative coexistence is built upon the initial first steps of understanding the other. If I can understand the other, then I can begin the first steps of appreciation of how our lives intersect and are codependent. If value is found in relationships, a dialogue is a step toward building a relationship. This process requires courage since it requires moving past our fear of the unknown. Do we have the courage to advance toward a new way of being?

In my job as a professor, I frequently meet with students outside of the classroom, and they present an array of questions. Recently, I met with a Japanese student over coffee. It was my first time meeting this student and he began by sharing his aspiration for attending graduate school in the US. He wanted to deepen his understanding of value-creating education and was hoping to focus on practice and not theory through graduate studies. As he shared his recent experience of studying in the US as an exchange student, I was struck with how he was working to make sense of the dynamics of racism in the US. He spoke of a 'canceling culture' and how he was shut down by other students when he tried to engage in dialogue with them. I explored the experience with him and sensed that the rejection by students of color was making him question their commitment to social change through dialogue. I could



also sense that he was feeling like a victim and could not push past the idea that he had tried to make an effort to have a dialogue with them and they had refused. The conversation left me wondering how we can stay engaged with those different from us, individuals who refuse our overtures of connection.

Afterward I wondered whether any trust had been developed by the two parties, that is, trust between the Japanese student and the US students of color. I could feel his frustration and yet could also see his limited line of reasoning: if I want to dialogue with them, they should also want to dialogue with me. Whenever I have found myself in a similar position, I recognize that if I do not trust the other person, and/or do not trust that the dialogue will be held openly and authentically, it feels like a disguise for a conversation or debate, where I will be talked to, not listened to.

The caution here is around the magical thinking that because I employ the word ‘dialogue’, that in fact I do not need to listen to, understand, or be open to transformation. The intention of engaging in a transformative experience of dialogue needs a firm commitment. We need to have the wisdom for how to prepare the pathway to dialogue. The conversation pathway for a transactional exchange does not require the same preparation. Implicitly perhaps certain agreements are needed but it is not dependent on the element of trust.

Can I trust that you will listen to understand? Can I trust that I will be safe in the dialogue? Can I trust that you are open to my being vulnerable and that you will not use my vulnerability against me? This authentic dialogic process has the capacity to honor one’s dignity. As Hicks clarifies, dignity is different from respect.<sup>17</sup> Dignity is a birthright and to malign another’s dignity, whether intentionally or unintentionally, causes injury to a person’s sense of well-being. These injuries accumulate over time and impinge on one’s ability to trust the other.

The art of dialogue is in the listening, the practice of listening. Holding the space open for another to share and where you are willing to engage fully as a listener. Anything else leads to and contributes to a transactional conversation. The wisdom of how and when to hold the space for dialogue is needed. This can contribute to a redesign of the future. This inspires hope. As Banerjee and Duflo share, “Hope is the fuel that makes people go.”<sup>18</sup> Ikeda unequivocally tells us that if there is no hope, we must create it ourselves.<sup>19</sup> Hope, in fact, is a decision not a static state. Creative coexistence as a pathway out of the COVID-19 storm will require hope. Hope that there must be a better way. Hope that we can together weave anew the fabric of society. Hope that young

women will not be fearful of being female. Hope that you will not be fearful of me. Hope that when taking the first tenacious steps toward building trust, we can sustain engagement and be in dialogue with one another. True, authentic dialogue.

## **2. Power and Global Citizenship**

As the field of global citizenship has expanded, diverse views of the concept have emerged, along with the question, global citizenship for what purpose? On the one hand, global citizenship sets a vision for being an individual of the world, supporting a global interdependence as someone who respects others, tolerates differences, and embodies courage, wisdom, and compassion.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, it is also viewed as a neo-liberal approach to the development of global human resources.<sup>21</sup> UNESCO has championed global citizenship as advancing a sense of belonging to a global community and contributing to social change.<sup>22</sup> Based on a definition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes, UNESCO promotes global citizenship education designed to teach core competencies through an approach to civic learning that empowers students to become active contributors in the resolution of global problems.<sup>23</sup>

A closer examination of the literature reveals gaps in how the field of global citizenship addresses issues of inequity and oppression. Schugurensky posits that power is inextricably linked to global citizenship.<sup>24</sup> A deeper understanding of global citizenship disrupts the notion that the Western world can continue perpetuating cultural dominance and unseats the false universalization of globalization. Critical global citizenship education holds that the purpose of global citizenship is to dismantle injustice, exploitation, and inequality.<sup>25</sup> Too often, countries that are less economically developed are approached in a spirit of charity, rarely recognizing that the impact of colonialism and manipulation by other governments have impacted these countries, diminishing economic strength and power. A critical frame positions the purpose of global citizenship as the pathway to establishing equity and justice.

### **Global Citizenship**

Magical thinking would have us believe that globalization is neutral, and that global citizenship, by definition, advances gender equity and inclusion. Unfortunately, scholarship in this field does not support this assumption. Magical thinking at times feels like a curse and it

distracts us from the hands-on work that is required to practice and embody global citizenship. In 2022, Ikeda shared in his peace proposal that “gender inequality and women’s empowerment are the keys to overcoming ... crisis ... and building a society that sustains human dignity”.<sup>26</sup> The benefits to the economic fabric of a society inclusive of women are well documented.<sup>27</sup> Without the intentional inclusion of women, and individuals from less economically developed countries, global citizenship efforts will promote the patriarchal system of the *haves* and the *have nots*. The gap between those with power and those without power will remain. A gendered approach to global citizenship will require relinquishing the magical thinking that girls and women are represented, equally and fairly, in the present understanding of global citizenship. Tackling gender inclusion with global wisdom will allow for the invisible to become visible, and for discussion of power distribution and reallocation to surface.

My students and I have worked to prepare for stepping onto the pathway of inclusive global citizenship. This work entails recognizing one’s own privilege and position. It involves an awareness of one’s values and beliefs. How can one embrace others’ values and practices if one’s own values and practices remain unnamed and even unknown? Students identify the values in their lives that are steering them on their life journey. They then work in diverse racial and ethnic groups to name the beliefs that, as a group, they hold dear. This practical work of naming and collaborating begins to reveal the tensions that emerge from differences. Tension is an experience that can lead to teachable moments and provides the nesting ground for transformation. I have discovered that this real, tangible work was needed in order to begin to foster a spirit of solidarity.

### **Diversity to Belonging**

Belonging is not a static state. It requires intentionality and is an ongoing process. Belonging is a shared responsibility. As a community, we set the criteria for who can belong. As individuals, we can intentionally extend ourselves to others. Individuals are seeking to belong and must also extend themselves, taking a risk and willing to chance being rejected. A sense of belonging in a global community must originate with individuals feeling a sense of belonging in their local community; after all, the global is constituted of the local.

Within the Soka Gakkai, a global network of individuals “awakened to a philosophy of peace and respect for the dignity of life”,<sup>28</sup> members find a sense of belonging to a faith-based community. In Harding and

Ikeda's dialogue, the two share how akin the beloved community experience from a Christian perspective is to a sense of community within the Soka Gakkai network.<sup>29</sup> Although these two individuals, Harding and Ikeda, are from different faith traditions, their shared definition of community embodies the spirit of inclusion and belonging. The larger question then is, how can one authentically navigate across differences? If we speak of transcending differences, too often this connotes ignoring differences.

In the organizational work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), differences exist between these four concepts that are often viewed as being interchangeable. Initially, it was commonly referred to in the US as DEI: diversity, equity, and inclusion. The aspect of belonging was added to take it to the next level of community. To better understand global citizenship through the lens of power, it is helpful if one understands the framework of DEIB. First, *diversity* in this framework refers to the numbers and percentages of individuals pertaining to certain groups. The primary reference groups include identification by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical/mental abilities. For example, the goal might be to increase the representation of women in the workforce from 5 percent to 20 percent. Or similarly, the demographics of an organization in the US may be reported as being 75 percent White, 20 percent Black, and 5 percent Hispanic. In the US, and now globally, representation matters and quantifying that representation defines diversity.

Second, *equity* has a focus on fairness and is defined by policies and laws. For example, to achieve equitable representation in housing in the US, individuals cannot be denied access based on gender, race, ethnicity, or age. Conversely, in Japan these laws against housing discrimination do not exist and one can be denied access because the individual is not Japanese or does not speak Japanese. Policies and laws create structures and processes that can either advance or impede equity and fairness.

Third, *inclusion* implies representation, plus the sharing of power. It reflects an active dismantling of oppressive structures through the inclusion of individuals who also have authority and power. It is not token representation. Finally, *belonging* moves the framework to a state where one is integral to the community or organization. Here, an individual, and their affinity group, is respected, valued, trusted, and stands equal in power.

Magical thinking would have us believe that to embrace global citizenship, it is enough to think about other people's culture and values, without questioning the history or power differential which has led to

exclusion and oppression. Global citizenship that embraces its purpose as movement along the DEIB framework reflects deeper structures and system change that will move toward a more just society for women and men from diverse backgrounds and diverse experiences. The global wisdom to embrace this more complex and more complete purpose of global citizenship is needed. While the process may begin with a global citizenship education curriculum in elementary school, broadening the child's awareness of others and inculcating the value of being of service to others, it must also evolve conceptually to examine the existing inequities that are palpable and oppressive. If it is agreed that gender rights are human rights, let us courageously stand at the crossroads of the storm and consciously view global citizenship through the lens of power. Who has it? Who owns it? What systemic oppression do the powerholders maintain? How can power be redistributed for the greater global good?

### **3. The Practice of Leadership**

The third element that will determine our future direction, and needs redefinition, is the practice of leadership. Leadership studies were initially represented by the Great Man theory.<sup>30</sup> This theory viewed leadership as positional, masculine, and inherent in one's birth. Fortunately, the field of leadership has evolved and now includes diverse perspectives, including the view that one can learn to be a leader, and that one is called into a practice of leadership in daily life, with or without a title or position.

For students, leadership is an aspiration. No one takes my leadership courses solely to learn leadership theory. Rather, when questioned, students reveal that they take leadership courses because they want to become good leaders, in the present and in the future. Students find themselves on athletic teams, in student clubs, in student organizations, or working collaboratively on student projects and want to be better leaders. In my leadership classes, I often ask students to identify leaders. Whom do they think of when they think of leaders? When students are asked to name a leader, 90 percent of the individuals named are males and in senior positions of power. As a follow up, when asked about female leaders, the two most frequently named individuals are Malala and New Zealand's Prime Minister Ardern. While students struggle to name female leaders, they are not at fault since the concept of leadership is commonly understood as being masculine. It is how society commonly portrays leaders and leadership. As we approach

leadership in this new era, we will have to unlearn our narrow definition of a leader, and learn anew that leadership is a skill, a mindset, and a way of being, open to all.

### **Praxis**

Leadership, like global citizenship, entails acquiring new knowledge and then putting that knowledge into practice. These two steps, acquisition and then the application of that knowledge, are followed by reflection, which is reviewing and processing new insights, successes, and failures. As described with coexistence, global citizenship, and now leadership, the practice of each of these is personal and relational. Why do we do what we do? Because it means something to us. It matters to us. It cannot just be words spoken, there must be action taken to contribute to change. Here again, the praxis experience is central to the state of *becoming*.

While numerous definitions of leadership exist, I deeply appreciate Senge's definition, where he states that leadership is the capacity of a human community to shape the future.<sup>31</sup> Leadership, while firmly rooted in the present, has a forward focus, and occurs in community with others, with the purpose of impacting the future. To tackle the COVID-19 storm, a storm that brought disruption across all facets of daily living from the individual to the international, both a present and future focus are needed.

Magical thinking would have us believe that just espousing the value or word is sufficient, when it is not. While this is a starting point, it is insufficient without its daily application to one's life. Magical thinking leads us to believe that only a chosen few are leaders. And yet, we lead in our own lives every day. We live in communities that are inspired and guided by us when we practice and embody leadership. With or without titles, leadership emerges. More importantly, one must ask, leadership for what purpose?

### **Belief and Hope**

In the spring of 2022 I asked students to write *belief and hope* statements. What do they believe in and what are they hopeful of? The initial response was one of surprise. One student shared that he had never thought about what he believed. As they set about writing their statements and sharing in small groups, there was laughter, surprise, and encouragement expressed. A few examples<sup>32</sup> of their *belief and hope* statements are shared here:

We *believe* peace is possible.

We *believe* that everyone can be a leader

We *believe* in the intelligence of human beings.

We *believe* in the power of the powerless people.

We *believe* education is the most powerful weapon for changing society.

We *believe* with time and continuous effort, we will be able to make change.

We *hope* we can embrace differences and not divisions.

We *hope* to see gender equality in the world.

We *hope* that by 2030 there will be no wars.

We *hope* that we can love each other.

This class activity of writing and sharing *belief and hope* statements was inspired by President Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention speech:<sup>33</sup> a speech of stories and visions that served as an invitation to creating a better world. Working with students in the university classroom, I bear witness to the possibilities of students as agentic beings, unlearning and relearning their own definitions of leadership. As Ikeda says, "Nothing is more crucially important today than the kind of human education that enables people to sense the reality of interconnectedness, to appreciate the infinite potential in each person's life, and to cultivate that dormant human potential to the fullest."<sup>34</sup> Leadership that propels us forward is needed now.

### **Reimagining Leadership**

Leadership does not require knowing the right answers; however, it does require having the courage to ask difficult questions. Young people do look for role models and mentors, while also struggling to imagine possibilities for themselves, for others, for a better world. The unlearning of the need to be a perfect leader is an important step in reimagining leadership. In a class reflection, one student talked about this process of unlearning:

To be a leader, I [believed I] had to be the most perfect version of myself to inspire and lead others. I do not share that sentiment anymore. I now view a leader as someone vulnerable and honest about their sufferings but courageous enough to have the determination and tenacity to overcome them for the sake of not only themselves but also for the service of others. I have to become a catalyst for change



to realize the version of society that I envision.<sup>35</sup>

When encouraged to relearn, unlearn, and learn anew, students reveal unprecedented agency and boldly choose critical awareness over ignorance. They courageously begin to reimagine themselves, reclaiming their wholeness to uplift others and work in solidarity toward the issues that confront humankind. Students have taught me that they will work to reclaim aspects of themselves that had been fabricated to fit someone else's ideal and will work to transform themselves into a source of energy with the goal of uplifting others. As one student shared in a class assignment, "I trust myself ... I am ready, I am ready to step-up ... and continue to work together with other[s] ... for a change."<sup>36</sup> These realizations and new learnings need space to grow in and to be tested. Safe spaces that allow for trial and error, and questioning. Safe spaces that will remind young leaders, you do not need to be perfect.

## Conclusion

A 21st century renaissance is upon us. The storm of COVID-19 has forced change, individually and collectively. If we are to embrace the opportunity this storm brings, change and transformation will be required of us. While magical thinking brings the familiar and comfort, it is time to create a new normal: a new society that is grounded in dignity and human solidarity. This article proposes that reimagining coexistence, power, and leadership will provide the needed scaffolding for a fresh start. Key questions can serve to recalibrate our setting to our True North. Begin with the question of purpose. For what purpose do we foster coexistence? What is the purpose of power in a realignment of global citizenship? Leadership serves what purpose? Setting our intention to this realignment is important.

Then, engage in praxis — take action. COVID-19 short-circuited the time we had anticipated certain change would and could take place. When the will of the people based on the urgency of the moment drove the change, change happened. Let us engage our collective wisdom, what I call global wisdom, to courageously act with purpose and intentionality, to hold critical and courageous conversation, and to engage young people boldly and authentically in the process of co-creation and redesign.

Let us courageously embed a gendered perspective in this redesign. We can no longer partake (either actively or passively) in the marginalization of women. Coexistence, global citizenship, and

leadership will continue to be hindered if 50 percent of the population is perceived as negligible. Redefining power will be a step in the right direction. The exclusion of women and nondominant voices has distorted our vision of future possibilities. Removing the blinders and then actively engaging others is the work needed of everyone.

Transformation must also occur at both the individual and societal levels, and the voices, ideas, and imagination of a younger generation need to be centered at the heart of the work. I trust that my students will be active change agents and leaders in this work. My job is to continue to hold the space and encourage deep inquiry, support the questions asking *why*, and make room for students to take risks.

COVID-19 has opened the door to risk-taking. Let us step into this space as courageous risk-takers, defy magical thinking, and trust one another. Global wisdom will need to be built on this trust. A rewearing of the fabric of society has begun. Let us personalize this work, aim for sustained engagement, and make effort every day. Mandela's words capture the imperative before us, "However hard this battle will be, we will not surrender. Whatever the time it will take, we will not tire ... if we are true to our commitment to protect human dignity, we fight on until victory is achieved".<sup>37</sup> Recognizing the urgency and importance of the work, let us also hold on to the promise of hope and possibility. As a Soka University student shared in a reflection at the end of a course on women and leadership,

If I want to understand where race and gender, or race and age, or gender and class, intersect, I need to make it personal. If I want to feel enraged and motivated to take action, I need to personalize it. If, as bell hooks said, I want to 'expand the circle of human concern' I need to make an issue my issue. Being part of the solution means exactly this, to personalize and then put into practice the learning from this class, and understand that change starts now, it starts where I am, and it starts with me.<sup>38</sup>

Together, let us face the new renaissance as an era of possibility, as a time of growth, and as an opportunity to reweave the fabric of society. We now know better. We can do better.

### Notes

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  - <sup>5</sup> Nkem Ifejika, 'What does Ubuntu Really Mean?', *The Guardian*, September 29, 2006, accessed July 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2006/sep/29/features11.g2>.
  - <sup>6</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, *The Light of Learning: Selected Writings on Education* (Chicago: Middleway Press, 2021).
  - <sup>7</sup> Ikeda, 2022 Peace Proposal.
  - <sup>8</sup> Veterans of Hope Project, n.d., accessed July 21, 2022, <https://www.veteransofhope.org/veterans/james-morris-lawson/>.
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  - <sup>12</sup> Mihaly Robert Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1990).
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  - <sup>16</sup> Ikeda, 2022 Peace Proposal.
  - <sup>17</sup> Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, reprint ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
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- <sup>26</sup> Ikeda, 2022 Peace Proposal, 14.
- <sup>27</sup> Banerjee and Duflo, *Good Economics for Hard Times*.
- <sup>28</sup> Ikeda, 2022 Peace Proposal, 8.
- <sup>29</sup> Harding and Ikeda, *America Will Be!*
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- <sup>35</sup> Maria Guajardo, 'Engaged Pedagogy and Journaling: A Pathway to Self-Transformation', *Feminist Pedagogy [Special Issue on b. hooks]* (in press).
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### About the Author

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