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Address by
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on the occasion of his installation
as Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

Paris, 15 November 1999

Madam President of the General Conference,
Mr Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Distinguished Heads of Delegation,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It is, beyond all doubt, an immense honour to appear before you today, after so many illustrious predecessors. I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for having placed your trust and your hopes in me in this way. Over the next six years, I shall try to be as worthy as I can of your confidence, and I make that solemn pledge before this distinguished assembly.

I am conscious, as I stand before you, of the immense responsibility with which you have entrusted me, and of the scale of the collective task that we can accomplish only by working together. For over half a century, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has pursued the goal of mobilizing those who are most willing to help, most generous with their talents and most fertile in imagination - but always on the basis of what is possible, feasible and practicable, in keeping with our resources, our means of action and also our commitment, in the pressing service of the inhabitants of our world. Yes, we must do all that we can - for the world expects no less - to help bring about the self-fulfilment of everyone, while showing respect for all. Therein lies the true touchstone of peace, what is known as the "Wisdom of Nations". This vision - yours and mine - has been that of UNESCO from 1946 to the present.

This is the vision that I have tried to make my own. Allow me, here, to introduce a personal note. For this was the vision of the world which I learnt as a child in Japan, where I witnessed the final years of the conflict, more terrible than all others, which disfigured the middle of the century now coming to an end. I was a little boy in the district of Yamaguchi, two hours by road from Hiroshima, under the incendiary bombs. I saw fear, death and grief raining down. Twice, not far from us, the flash of a nuclear explosion lit up the sky. Luckily for humanity, there has been no repetition of this too bright light up to the end of the century, at least not above the heads of the living.

But can we be so sure that we will never see it again? I still remember my first visit to Tokyo, three years after the end of the war. From the surroundings of the Imperial Palace, still standing intact in the centre of our capital, I could see all the way out to the distant suburbs, for the buildings all around had been reduced to rubble!

In this way, through a lesson in horror which was almost too graphic, I saw the manifest consequences of a long militaristic and misguided policy. And believe me, for those who survived such an ordeal, the words of peace; of the stubborn search for tolerance; of universal disarmament; of the effort to channel the human potential into the service of education, science, communication and culture; such words, I say, can never sound hollow.

For those who grew up in post-war Japan, under the harsh conditions of food shortages and material deprivation which followed so many years under arms, peace came to assume vital importance. Confronted in the face of its share of responsibility for starting the bloody events of the first half of the century, our country forever renounced, in its Constitution, the use of armed force and undertook to work for “peaceful cooperation with all nations”. The founding document of the new Japan recognized that “all peoples of the world have the right to live in peace, free from fear and want”, and further asserted forcefully that “laws of political morality are universal”.

The United Nations came into being in the very same year in which we turned our backs on war. Our different political thinkers, although belonging to the most diverse currents of opinion, did not fail to note the striking convergence between the articles of our new Constitution and the wording of the Charter of the United Nations. In November 1946, the Constitution of UNESCO proposed “to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

As a young man, I therefore chose my country’s diplomatic service. As I saw it, this was a way of contributing to the cause of peace among all nations. And I see nothing other than a logical, indeed an essential, continuity between my then commitment to peace in a national setting and my new functions today, under international auspices. UNESCO extends, continues, I might even say crowns a career which has been totally devoted to understanding among peoples.

As a student in the United States and subsequently on diplomatic service throughout five continents, I got to know the culture of others, to meet others as friends. This is a deep conviction of mine: getting to know the culture of others, listening to what they have to say, dispels hatred and mistrust, and helps to build peace. It is only through open-mindedness of this kind that we can perceive the true wellsprings of our own civilization, by the clear light of comparison and contact. All living cultures are in motion and influence one another. In the words of an English poet, “No man is an island”.

And here I should like to venture a paradox. Neither is there an island - and certainly not my own - that could henceforth accept mere island status. Nowadays, no island is an island. As Arnold Toynbee pointed out, the history of Great Britain, even at the height of its imperial power, can only be understood in the light of all the cultural influences that it has received, over the centuries, from the neighbouring continent - beginning with the light cast by Greece, that was so powerfully refracted by Rome. Our Japanese islands themselves were nurtured in their own way by contributions from Korea, China, India, even from Iran and far-off Hellenized Asia - and more recently from Europe and the United States. No sooner had contact between our islands and the rest of the world been restored, during the Meiji period, than it was Japan’s turn, in the space of a few years, to exert an immediate and far-reaching influence on Western aesthetics through the works of its great latter-day artists, during the triumphant years of Impressionism and the Ecole de Paris, until it began to play its present-day political, economic, scientific and cultural role in the indivisible and universal concert of nations.

Throughout my diplomatic career I have become daily more convinced of this idea of the incessant mutual enrichment of all human cultures, by their profound spiritual and moral unity. The concept of human solidarity forged by exchange underpins our institution, and in

1968 my illustrious predecessor René Maheu expressed it in words that are still poignant: “to open one’s mind to the universal human dimension is to gain access to all the riches of the world and of history, but it is also to wear oneself out in a constant effort to surpass oneself”.

This unity can even be seen face-to-face, if I may put it like that. One of the most deeply moving encounters of my life took place at the research centre of the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa last March when I saw the bones of our common mother “Lucy”, who lived some three million years ago. Her remains may be those of the oldest known hominid. She belonged to the *Australopithecus* species. It seems that we are all distant descendants of Lucy. Through her we recognize ourselves as members of a single family. Lucy’s children peopled every continent: from Africa to Europe, and from Asia to the Americas.

The heritage of Lucy’s descendants is certainly extremely rich: it is the heritage of our different cultures, and of our so numerous languages too, which UNESCO is responsible for helping to safeguard, in the same way as it safeguards our monuments and works of art, all of them inestimable treasures of the human memory.

More than eight centuries ago the great Muslim poet Sa’dî of Shirâz had already sensed, it is true, the indivisible unity of our species in these magnificent lines: “all humans form a single being; he who touches one of its limbs, touches me - and if he wounds it, he wounds me”.

For Lucy’s legacy also has a darker side.

Could our distant mother ever have imagined so many descendants? On 12 October the population of the world reached six billion individuals spread over some 200 States: and there are still many obvious problems.

Half a century after the founding of UNESCO in the wake of a world war, when the hope prevailed that such slaughter would never be seen again, we cannot fail to see that Lucy’s descendants are still busy fighting each other. Fortunately, the nightmare of the Cold War has passed, but not the nightmare of so many local and civil wars where, as always, intolerance vies with hatred - for territorial, ethnic, even religious reasons - and often with truly terrifying arsenals.

In the sciences, incontestable advances in medical research have nonetheless blurred a great many ethical reference points. Genetic engineering is worrying. By ravaging whole countries like the great plagues of the past, new epidemics such as AIDS are still defying the efforts of our laboratories. These diseases strike the poorest populations hardest because investment in expensive remedies with little market potential is unfortunately still hesitant. And how can one mention the prodigious upheavals in the fields of computing and telecommunications, without at the same time worrying about the widening gap between the new scribes who have mastered these refined tools and the mass of those who have, as it were, now become in this respect the new illiterates?

Madam President,
Mr Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The chasm of poverty has not at all been closed: nor, in today's globalized economy, is the abyss between the haves and the have-nots merely geographical, a matter of "North" and "South" as so often described. A widening rift between the few rich and the many poor splits numerous societies in the so-called "South", while the spectre of unemployment has returned to haunt many of the proudest industrialized nations in what is conventionally labeled, the "North": undermining the sense of personal dignity of countless workers in the name of economic logic.

But two thirds of the world's inhabitants live in the so-called developing countries of the "South". A third are children aged less than 15, with trends pointing to even higher proportions of youth in the next generation, along with corresponding soaring demands on education. Some of these States, to be sure, are indeed developing, though with glaring social discrepancies. But others seem to be falling by the wayside, pushed farther back into absolute poverty through natural or man-made disaster, and reduced to apparently endless dependence upon international emergency aid - just to survive, not develop.

Yet such wretchedness often seems almost unreal to the other third of the world's population, as if only a series of virtual images of squalor, periodically flitting across a television screen. To some, the poorer countries only appear as so many opportunities to delocate their industries towards reservoirs of cheaper labour, or as dumping grounds for pollutants henceforth banned at home. But others see these lands as a dark menace, as sources of uncontrolled immigration threatening to confiscate domestic jobs: whence ugly fresh spurts of racism.

Finally, concern over the very future of our crowded planet remains unalleviated. The natural riches we daily deplete may never be replenished again, and the vast bodies of water we soil, while killing off countless varieties of marine life, might never more be cleansed. One of our most pressing tasks is to preserve what is most precious today while addressing the human needs of tomorrow. Sustainable development, meaning the world we must leave to future generations in terms of available and renewable resources, with human potential intact, has become very much the tallest order of the day.

Of course our world picture should not be painted too dark. Since 1946, much headway has been made. The prophetic creators of UNESCO foresaw the foundations of our world body becoming ever more democratic: that is, enshrining "the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect" of all human beings, as stated in the founding document.

Certain standards of human dignity, in the eyes of nearly all human beings, have become almost universal concepts. At least we know that repeated reference to ideals can ultimately dictate and entail some effort to live up to them. Despite local lapses still absolutely to be condemned, the recognition of the true equality of all human beings before the law, regardless of colour, gender, language, or creed, is in general hardly any longer even questioned - at least, in so many words. Member States have multiplied because whole peoples have become independent; and member governments know how much they must pay increasing heed to the governed. By gathering delegates of governments who themselves must give account to their citizens, UNESCO, in turn, becomes ever more accountable to the civil societies of the world

at large: that is, to the entire human family. And such is the moral responsibility which UNESCO seeks.

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It has become something of a cliché to say that we are now leaving one century, indeed one millennium, in order to enter another, as if a mere change in digits made any real difference to our lives. Still, the mind likes to find its bearings in such conventional time references. It is moreover true that when the twentieth century opened, prevailing human wisdom believed, rather intoxicated with its own success, that the march of scientific and technical progress would almost automatically lead on to further human happiness and moral enlightenment: while by mid-century, when UNESCO was created, the general view had become far more sober, in grim awareness of all the best, and all the worst, that human beings can do.

The dominant note today, as the twentieth century ends, is one of necessary and vigilant caution. We glimpse how much technology can deliver, but are also now keenly aware of how much our guiding moral sense must remain alert. It is also true that we here at UNESCO, after sighing with relief at the end of the Cold War with its rigidly imposed grid, know that we are experiencing another striking turn in history, curiously parallel to that faced by our founders at the close of World War II. For we see international affairs becoming more fluid again, with fresh choices once more open before us - but also uncertainty and risk.

Again, the world in 1946 was far from perfect. It is far from perfect now. But what UNESCO offered then, and still does today, was a “factor of hope”, in Dr Julian Huxley’s words. UNESCO’s first Director-General saw in the Organization’s creation a “milestone in the unification of the spirit of man”.

UNESCO is such a factor of hope, because it is the one international organization which, through all its programmes, respects and defends what is of universal worth and dignity in the material and spiritual heritage of all cultures: and thereby, the absolute dignity of all human beings themselves. Respect for individual dignity is indeed one of UNESCO’s key concepts. Globalization has actually been progressing for far more than five centuries now, indeed ever since humanity’s increasing mastery in the navigation of all the earth’s oceans. But what is happening now is globalization’s dramatic acceleration, thereby presenting a global challenge, and so demanding a global answer. Yet the response must be made with all due respect for the cultural diversity and identity, for that priceless individual component, that makes up the sheer dignity of our many peoples.

But UNESCO can only go on providing the world with such hope, and such defence, if it proves itself an adequate world instrument. UNESCO is no end in itself. UNESCO is a world service, or, if you like, a tool, at once delicate, highly complex, and precious. Humanity may all the better avail itself of such a tool if all the world’s States - and peoples - agree once again to make proper use of it, and so contribute to its efficiency and universality. UNESCO must once more represent the whole world, with no exceptions. I pledge to do my best, in the course of my stewardship, to persuade those who would still stand outside, to return, or newly join.

But criticisms, not all of them unfair, have been levelled against this great instrument: and failings, where verified, must be made good. The purpose of sound management is, again,

no end in itself, but a duty: to ensure that our institution fully discharges its great task as a true world service, responsible and accountable to the world - and to the worlds' taxpayers.

Our resources are therefore not unlimited, nor should we spread ourselves too thin. I propose that we streamline our activities within the limits of our budgets, and closely focus upon those programmes which are our true mandate - not for the sake of fashionable austerity, but in order to make a real impact where best we may, and where truly we must, provide our needed service: in our ongoing war against poverty, through education and the nurturing of human resources.

Our task is to favour development on behalf of human beings - and certainly not the other way around! I suggest pursuit of our most practically conceived programmes, in cooperation with leading institutions, scientists and scholars around the world, in terms of our four great directives on behalf of education, science, culture and communication.

UNESCO is a challenging paradox. It cannot lapse into a mere club for intellectuals, but must serve as a forum for international intellectual exchange. It cannot pretend to be a research institution, but must keep abreast of and stimulate research. Nor is it an operational agency, yet it must see that global ethics for peace, justice and solidarity, through international cooperation in education, science, culture and communication, are both morally observed, and tangibly applied. Finally, UNESCO is not a funding agency, although it must provide catalytic funds to generate further funding: in order to demonstrate that ideals only take shape through action.

I shall have occasion to address practical approaches in some detail, regarding management and other related matters, both before the Executive Board and before all the assembled delegates to UNESCO: because all members of this Organization must be closely involved in dealing with these issues. We need to improve coordination and, indeed, harmonious cooperation between all three of this Organization's essential components: Secretariat, Executive Board, and General Conference. I might add that one of my concerns will be fully to revitalize the Secretariat, UNESCO's most precious asset.

Moreover, the kind of participatory governance that UNESCO promotes internationally, it should also apply to itself: by improving its own working environment, the better to tap the wealth of knowledge, experience and enthusiasm that each one of its staff members has to offer.

Beyond governments, UNESCO must also join and maintain dialogue with the representatives of civil society, such as the great NGOs. UNESCO must speed up structural reforms, and heighten the efficiency and transparency of its management, because Member States, and the world's peoples, can expect no less from this institution: the better to conceive, and to carry out, the bold new programmes which the next century will demand.

Here I can only evoke a few examples.

One of my stewardship's absolute priorities will be to assist and reinforce basic education wherever needed - with due regard for the local culture. Basic education for young children, both boys and girls, is the single key to their future, to any hope for employment, livelihood, and social emancipation. It is also the first and necessary step towards democratizing access to higher education or vocational training. Indeed, basic education is the

true driving force for sustainable development in the world. I shall pursue this effort on behalf of basic education in every practical way throughout my term in office.

Basic education moreover fosters the initial seeds of mutual understanding, through the twin key concepts of “tolerance” and “learning to live together”, whereby all and each may be enriched in a harvest of many cultures.

Another priority will concern science, in a global approach examining its links to development and to the fate of humanity as a whole, while assessing the many new ethical challenges it poses - as in the case, say, of the human genome. UNESCO for its part must increasingly concentrate on those scientific programmes where it can play a truly original role, such as those pertaining to ecological issues and to the most rational husbanding of natural resources, and moreover continue to promote international cooperation and exchange of theoretical and applied scholarship: here again, especially in view of preserving the environment and of mitigating natural disasters. UNESCO will further seek to strengthen and multiply ties between major centres for research, science and technology.

But science today also means the social sciences. Rapid world change and manifold transformations in the relations within and between human communities must be assessed and understood in depth - while the need to deliver fair justice to all, in the face of heightening social discrepancies, tensions and conflicts, requires considerable education in human rights and ethics: and this too is a crucial UNESCO task.

We must moreover continue to play a major role in the cultural field, where UNESCO enjoys great experience. This is to pursue the safeguarding of the world heritage - both artistic and natural: for it is an essential part of our mandate to promote informed respect for the achievements of the earth’s many peoples. As I said when serving as Chair for the World Heritage Committee, the monuments inherited from our human past, along with the features of our landscape, are so many material moorings, which we wish to bequeath to the human future. In UNESCO’s view, cultural diversity, but also cultural exchange, are in fact twin and inseparable notions: whereby we may learn from each, and yet may contribute to all. In light of today’s globalization, it is becoming increasingly important for peoples to protect their cultural identity and heritage, including intangible cultural treasures.

Such a heritage to cherish thus not only concerns our material endowment in terms of natural landmarks or buildings from the past - it also addresses the knowledge and meaning these material riches have to impart to our contemporary world, and hence implies involvement in fresh creativity. I intend to enhance UNESCO’s commitment to contemporary cultural expressions, the better for us to understand the major trends in today’s world.

In terms of communications, still another of our Organization’s chief pillars, UNESCO must continue to champion free expression, and also to defend international diversity in the production and flow of cultural goods - while keenly working to democratize and facilitate access to information and knowledge in all forms. UNESCO thus notably addresses the crucial worldwide challenge raised by today’s emerging information society: along with all the social, cultural and ethical implications of electronic media. UNESCO’s task here includes dealing with the very unequal admittance to sources of information in the world’s various countries.

In every one of these fields, UNESCO will bring all its influence and pressure to bear, in order to enhance the role and increase the participation of women. And our Organization must

also pay heightened attention to the hopes of the world's youth: for the cultural trends and manifold expressions of today's young should inspire us, if UNESCO wishes to inspire them.

UNESCO must thus remain true to itself, as an abiding and continually vital institution, while yet addressing each day's new issues, and thus undergoing each age's necessary challenges. I should like here to refer to the great seventeenth-century Japanese poet, Bashô, who dwelt on such a living contrast between Fueki, the fundamental unchanging permanence of things, and Ryuko, the trends and changes of the era. In other words, things which must change, do change; and things which must not change, will not change.

So with UNESCO, whose great task continues.

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Madam President,
Mr Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Mr Director-General and dear friend, Professor Federico Mayor,

At this moment when I accept the heavy responsibility of succeeding you as Director-General, I should like to express to you, on behalf of us all, our respect and gratitude for the work you have performed during your 12 years of office.

Your latest books, *Un mundo nuevo* and *Los nudos gordianos*, will remain with us as a living source of inspiration, urging us to an ever deeper commitment to the ideals of UNESCO.

Your achievements, Mr Director-General, have already taken their place within a vast endeavour that transcends our personal destinies. And here I should like to quote some lines of a great poet of the twentieth century, Vicente Huidobro, a Chilean of universal scope, who is one of your favourite writers:

The flowers and the grasses fade
Perfume floats faintly on the air like bells ringing in another province
Other looks and other voices come
Other waters flow in the river
Other leaves appear suddenly in the wood
...
My heart will overflow the earth
And the universe will be my heart.

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Madam President,
Mr Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Huidobro might almost be Buddhist, and echo Bashô, in thus evoking the necessary ever-changing surface pattern of what, in essence, must be changeless.

An ancient tradition, dear to all civilizations, is that there exists a subtle link between the inner harmony of human beings, and the balance of the natural world around us - as if we projected thereon our own inner turmoil, or inner peace. One of the guiding principles of our Japanese ethics is just such harmony, which we call *wa*, our own pronunciation of the Chinese character *hé*. This strong belief in harmony has endured with us to this day. As Director-General, I should like to impart the spirit of *wa*. In accordance with *wa*, tensions should be resolved, not through conflict, but through harmony - and not only amongst one another, but in attunement and sensitivity to the very flow of the natural order around us.

In the whirl of this changing age, let us stand firm and faithful to our enduring purpose: "building peace in the minds of men".

Thank you.