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Address by  
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Chairperson of the Executive Board  
of the United Nations Educational,  
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at the inaugural meeting of the  
32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference

Paris, 29 September 2003

Mr President of the General Conference,  
Mr Director-General,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to address you at the opening of this 32nd session of the General Conference, the end of which will coincide with the end of the biennium during which I had the task of chairing the Executive Board. This period was replete with intense activity and work, and full of great promises and hopes. We achieved what we did in the course of the biennium thanks to the fruitful cooperation of all the Board Members, the Director-General and all the staff of the Secretariat. I cannot forget our close cooperation with the President of the General Conference, Ambassador Ahmad Jalali, whose term of office expires today, and who gave the Board the benefit of his fine words and profound thoughts.

The current session of the General Conference comes at a time of increased awareness, on the international stage, of the importance of multilateral work – of the importance of the United Nations system in general, and of the role of our Organization in particular. With the return of the United States of America to full membership in the Organization, UNESCO is recovering both its standing and its universal dimension. This universality is the very *raison d'être* of UNESCO because the Organization is unique among all its sister agencies of the United Nations system in being a laboratory of ideas. This laboratory can only perform its function properly by seeking out all intellectual forces, wherever they may be, and engaging with them on the basis of real give and take.

Here I am bound to mention one of the founding fathers of our Organization, the American poet Archibald McLeish, and his role in laying the foundations of the dream by building our Organization. He was the author of the ringing cry first uttered during the preparatory meetings for the foundation of UNESCO, the cry that was to show the path the Organization has charted for itself ever since its foundation, since it took its place at the beginning of the Organization's Constitution: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." The renewed encounter between the American intellectual community and UNESCO will impart to the Organization fresh lustre similar to that imparted to it upon its foundation – the lustre that carries with it the hope of peace, justice and love among peoples, and the hope of using all available means in the fields of education, science, culture and communication to promote people's welfare wherever they are. Human welfare and respect for human dignity are at the core of all religions and creeds, and of all beautiful ideas. Those two objectives must be the ideal for which our Organization strives. UNESCO was founded following the Second World War, with the toll of death and destruction that it imposed on all humankind, in order to appeal to the human intellect to cooperate to renounce malice, violence and hatred in all their forms, and to work to build a new world on the ashes of the old, wounded, bleeding world that was exhausted by the trials of war, a new world based on justice, freedom and awareness, a world which would renounce all forms of rancour, racism, discrimination and violence, a world in which all the peoples of the world would find their place, and in which all people would be free and equal.

The current session of the General Conference will serve to update UNESCO's constantly renewed role at a time when the world is witnessing grave events, for humankind today stands face to face with problems which threaten its very existence. The tremendous scientific and

technological progress under way in the world today has made us realize just how frail our planet is, and more generally how fragile its equilibrium is; it has also made us realize the need to ensure that human beings are the purpose and goal of this progress. Yes, we need progress in ethics and humanitarian theory to keep pace with this rapid scientific progress, and to be capable of containing it and guiding it. The world therefore needs UNESCO more today than at any time in the past; it needs its ethical and intellectual role to set the necessary standards and to support cultural diversity and make it flourish, and to help all humankind to follow the march of knowledge. The modernization of our Organization's role is none other than its renewal as the conscience of all humankind, for this is the organization that endeavours to think constantly about the future of our planet and the future of humankind in order to support world equilibrium, combat poverty, eradicate illiteracy, and build a world in which justice, solidarity, coexistence and tolerance reign supreme. The participation in this session of this large number of heads of State and government, ministers, scientific and intellectual figures is surely proof of their confidence in our Organization and of the hopes that are pinned on it.

The edifice of conscience cannot be built in one go, once and for all, because it is a structure which rests on life and experience. As long as there is life there is development based on trial and error – this is the law of existence. Clearly, this edifice needs much discussion, reflection and sincere and diverse work. We are in the process of entering the global village that is our world but we can only enter by means of our beautiful diversity, our numerous experiences, and the ability of each and every one of us to give of our best in order to enhance this wonderful structure. Ladies and gentlemen, these are the challenges of the future, and I very much hope that our General Conference will be equal to them. Peace be upon you. Thank you for your attention.