

**Creating a Forum Where Leaders of the World's
Religions Can Gather in Mutual Respect and Dialogue**

Welcome and Reflection

**His Holiness the Dalai Lama
Richard Blum and Bishop William Swing**

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**Agenda & Conversation Guide:
An Appreciative Inquiry**

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Overview

MONK: "All these mountains and rivers and the great earth—where do they come from?"

MASTER: "Where does this question of yours come from?"

Early in the 1990s His Holiness the Dalai Lama proposed, "If the leadership of the world's religions could get to know one another better...the world could be a better place."

Today's meeting might be viewed as a humble start, an exploration, of this idea. The purpose is a simple one:

To create a beginning of what ultimately might be made available for the world's religious leaders—a secure, private, small and relatively unstructured forum where leaders can have conversation with one another, know one another in mutually respectful ways, and reflect on the hard issues of the world without binding any institution to another.

This "workbook" provides a set of questions to spark a dialogue related to the purpose just stated. It explores, for example, hopes that call us here, experiences we bring to this work, our deeper concerns about the world, insights about significant engagement across faiths and religions, and visions of a better world.

The questions are offered as a starting point, a seed, for meaningful conversation.

The flow of the day will be a simple one involving whole group discussion of our agenda with some one-on-one conversation and moments of silence. Even though it is only one day, we do want to create a retreat-like atmosphere of reflection and hospitality.

The opening dialogue sets the stage for a new appreciation of one another, our work in the world, and conditions we feel will make meetings like this a success.

I. OPENING DIALOGUE

Question #1: A story from your life journey...?

One could say a key task in life is to discover and define our life purpose, and then accomplish it to the best of our ability.

- Can you share a story of a moment, or of the period of time, where **clarity about life purpose** emerged for you— for example, a moment where your calling happened, where there was an important awakening or teaching, where there was a special experience or event, or where you received some guiding vision?
- Now, beyond this story...What do you sense you are supposed to do before your life, this life, is over

Question #2: Insights from important interfaith encounters—exploring the personal meeting and friendship between people of different religions?

We have all been changed both in outlook and in our lives, because of encounters with people from other spiritual traditions or religions. In your work as a leader you might have had one, two, or perhaps many encounters with people of other traditions that stand out as particularly significant.

- Can you share a story of one experience that stands out in your memory— for example, an encounter outside the normal “safety zone” where you were surprised or humbled, or where there was an experience of healing and hope, or where there was a genuine experience of compassion, joy, love, or friendship?
- Whether it was difficult or easy, what did you come to respect most, not just about that person, but about their particular religion or practice?

Question #3: Qualities that would make meetings like this significant and effective?

You probably already know, based on years of experience, what kinds of things would make this type of meeting between leaders of the world’s religions worthwhile, meaningful, and successful.

- What qualities of relating would help make it work?
- What qualities or gifts do you and/or your religious tradition bring to this kind of meeting?
- Bottom line: what would make meetings like this worthwhile to you?

(Note: This question will be discussed when we come back in the whole group.)

II. INSIGHTS FROM THE PAST

Question #4: World events and trends over the past 100 years?

Taking steps to create an enduring dialogue among leaders of religions does not happen in a vacuum.

- Think about the five most important historical events that have occurred over the past 100 years— global or local events and trends that give *you* a sense of urgency, readiness, or calling for our work here. What trends or challenges do you see as most significant? Examples?

III. ASSESSMENT OF THE PRESENT: OUR WORLD AND THE HARD ISSUES

Question # 5: The emerging story of inter-religion relationships?

The 1996 Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential lists over 15,000 global problems and documents, for example, that half of the armed conflicts in the world in early 1993 were not between nation-states but between groups from different religions. Against the background of many world problems and conflicts there is also a hopeful story which offers a glimmer of what is possible when we find ways to promote peace rather than war, cooperation rather than prejudice, and sustainability rather than environmental degradation and human oppression.

The century since that historic gathering in 1893 in Chicago—the Parliament of World Religions—has seen a vast widening of interfaith dialogue, inter-religious prayer and meditation, pilgrimages, joint action, and study in world religions. Indeed it appears there is a worldwide urge for an enduring, daily cooperation among people of the world’s religions to make peace among religions and to serve, in the presence of the sacred, the flourishing of all life. As leaders in these arenas: What are we most proud about? What are we most sorry about?

- Think about the most significant achievements, milestones, developments and infrastructures that have happened locally or globally in your lifetime. What developments are you most proud about.
- *Conversely, as you look at events or trends in the world, and the current responses of religious leaders including yourself, what are you*

most sorry about? More important, what should we be doing more of or different?

IV. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: VISIONS OF A BETTER WORLD

Question #6: Your vision of a better world, and the special tasks and significance of the world's religions in the new century?

Dag Hammarskold, former UN Secretary General said: "I see no hope for permanent world peace. We have tried and failed miserably. Unless the world has a spiritual rebirth, civilization is doomed. It has been said that the next century will be a spiritual century or it will not be."

Put your thinking about 30 years, a generation or so, into the future. Even though the future is, in so many ways, a mystery, we want to begin to visualize the kind of world you feel we are being called to realize, a better world, the kind of world you really want. What do you see in your vision of a better world?

- Specifically what are **three** changes or developments in your vision? What is happening in the world a generation from now that is positive and different, and how do you know? How would you feel if these three things were realized?

Question #7: Your vision of the relationships between the world's religions and leaders?

The assumption in the invitation to today's meeting is that there needs to be, in today's complicated and interconnected world, an ongoing and sustained conversation among the religious leaders of the world. The simple hypothesis: the world will be a different place, a better place. It is easy to see the value of something like this, is it not?

Let's imagine a scale from 1 to 10—where a rating of ten represents *the ideal kind of relationship among leaders* of the world's religions and spiritual traditions. Leaders of the religions are relating in ways people would be proud to point to—as examples or stories for the world's children.

- What does your "10" look like? The quality of relationships? Kinds of contact and communication?
- Let's assume a significant and growing number of leaders from the world's religions do choose "to get to know one another"—and it begins to succeed. A safe, confidential, ongoing, and non-binding

forum is created. How might the world benefit? How might you and your faith community or organization benefit?

VII. FUTURE MEETINGS: 1999 AGENDA, HOW OFTEN, AND WHERE

Question #8: Next Steps?

Again, putting yourself in the future, lets suppose that, in fact, a high quality and enduring forum for dialogue has been successfully created—it is a safe and level playing field where leaders and their envoys can come together to talk, in confidence, about the hard issues of the world.

- As you imagine such a forum, and we can design it in any way we wanted, and assuming resources are not a constraint, what are some things that could happen, or should happen, to make it a win-win-win for everyone—for the world, for work in our respective traditions, and for inter-faith relationships?
- *Bottom line:* What would make it significant, exciting or high priority and meaningful for you?
- What are some possible places for a next meeting?
- What would you propose for items on the Agenda?