

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

Some of what I have to say may sound political. But I assure you that I am not purposely coming from the left or the right. No call for upheaval or revolt - but I will gladly lead a call for an *evolution*. An evolution would be based on power not force - the power of new thinking, new ideas - not the force of one group over another. At a recent event, I saw Kansas Senator Brownback in a conversation with Madeline Albright – they called themselves the “odd couple” – they came together over issues that everyone agreed had to be addressed – things like child trafficking – that was a powerful, and an encouraging site to see.

So I would like to examine a rather well-worn quote by the king of power over force, Mahatma Gandhi, who said, “ You must be the change you want to see in the world”. I’ve heard that one a lot lately.

I’d like to rephrase that a few ways - You cannot have the outer world you wish for without first living it inside yourself. Or maybe simply, our world is a reflection of our choices and behavior. Now that’s pretty obvious on a small personal scale. But I’m beginning to believe that what we do really does affect things in a much bigger way.

Many would have us believe that a more perfect world comes from adherence to certain ways of thinking – usually thinking that’s more like our own (this applies to couples as well as governments, by the way). While some conformity is necessary in a functioning society (airlines pilots throughout the world speak English for example), things cannot apply so uniformly and in such specificity that they stifle hope - “the pursuit of happiness” or dreams...and society can hope that the outcome of personal desires contribute somehow to the betterment of the whole.

The betterment of the whole used to mean the family, or the neighborhood, the tribe, or the town – but now, for the first time in human history – it’s the planet.

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

Politics, epidemics, social fragmentations, our personal desires and frustrations – they’ve always lived a similar story. Maybe history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes... But we are beginning to live in a different world. Now what happens around the globe can be seen and heard and *felt* like never before. It seems that it’s time to start creating a different history. From the tribes throughout the world to the relatively recent phenomenon of nation states – we are suddenly interconnected and interdependent - we are a united world. United people. And we have to adjust to that.

Some people have always lived interdependently. Bishop Desmond Tutu said that the essential wisdom of Africa about the human condition is captured in the word “ubuntu”. The literal translation of “ubuntu”, in English, is, “I am because you are.”

That is not “I think therefore I am” that is “I am because *you* are”. Total interdependent thinking.

This doesn’t mean we all have to get along. The 60’s ideal of loving one another is an anachronism – but the need to respect one another is now vital to human existence. Respect not only for other people living different lives than we would choose but also for the idea that we are here as a part of a living system. We are a small piece of an integrated whole. We must begin to see ourselves individually, as a community, as a country living within a system that requires each of us to consider our impact on the whole as we live our lives. We are not the custodians of the planet – we are the custodians of *ourselves*. This world is not really as fragile as we have made it out to be. It has been around a long time. It will continue long after we’re gone. We are making it fragile. We are the ones losing our balance.

Do we care about what we’re leaving behind? Really? Or are we all just here to get our needs met – do we really think about the world we’re leaving for our children? Or is the truth that we won’t be here anyway, so we ultimately just care about our own survival?

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

The life we *are* leaving for our children, grandchildren and just as importantly, people we'll never meet, will probably not be better than our own - and most likely considerably worse – but only if we choose to keep repeating ourselves.

So maybe we could accelerate the rate in which we learn from our mistakes.

Frankly, I believe the country needs to get over itself. As Lincoln said in his 1862 State of the Union address, “We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country”. The liberation needed in this case comes from taking responsibility. It's what happens when you mature.

Much like a child, this country needs to understand that it is part of a larger world and it must behave in a self reflective, communal way – not a self-centered, imperialistic way.

Many of you know of my involvement with the Native American culture. I'm not here to provoke guilt. I'm only saying that the country needs to reflect on its behavior and accept its own imperfections in the world. It doesn't mean that we're a less desirable a place to live – in fact desirability increases. Much like a well- rounded, experienced, mature individual is much more appealing to be around than a grown up child.

We are living in a 200-year old definition of a grand experiment of man's potential. Some of it has worked very well and has certainly inspired some great leadership as well as extraordinary growth in human capacities. But this country is extremely young – the idea of independent nation-states is extremely young. And if you remember your own youth – if it's anything like mine I sometimes can't believe how many dumb mistakes I made not to mention how many things I've still got to learn. Certainly this country is learning – but there was 100 years between the Civil War and civil rights. It was nearly 100 years ago that women finally got the right to vote – and we've got a long way to go to reach true gender equality. It's a slow process for sure.

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

In my own effort to reflect a world I'd like to see more of I've found that the more I listen, the more I learn. The less I assume I know, the more I learn. And I begin to realize not only the breadth and depth of human experience, but how little I really know about what motivates people or what gives them hope, joy, grief, anger. And then I start to lose the ability to judge others too much. And along with the waning judgment comes growing acceptance – not necessarily understanding – but a willingness to see the complexity in someone's beliefs about the world. Seeing this complexity leads to respect - and respect is the fulcrum on which all relationships should be balanced - person to person, government to government, man to nature, even supply to demand.

So the simplest way to show respect – by listening - allows others to talk and *be heard*. That's as true for things we can literally hear as for things that we can only feel in our gut. When we are making choices for foundation giving we have to ask ourselves, “Am I listening to the people I'm trying to help? Am I respecting their point of view? Do I really understand the complexity of the situation? Or am I simply falling prey to what I call philanthropic colonialism - am I somehow just satisfying my needs or desires – projecting my way of thinking - at the expense of other people?”. I was told of a project that focused on digging wells in African villages so women wouldn't have to walk hours to get water. What could possibly be wrong with that? Well...it turns out the women liked getting away from the men. It gave them a chance to talk and enjoy each other's company. Now those people are asking – “if you want a well dug, where do you want it?”

But listening takes time. Time is part of what I think of as interpersonal surface area. It's important to create enough surface area between two objects so that some kind of bonding can take place. The time, the shared experience - all critical for greater understanding between people.

We listen, we learn, we respect differences, we begin to break old patterns.

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

But how much time do we have to listen when we're distracted to the point of being nearly hypnotized? I was in a meeting recently and was thanked for paying attention - thanked that I wasn't looking down at my Blackberry (I don't actually own one). I learned that it's quite normal to share your meeting with an electronic device that competes for your attention.

It's crazy to think that we can't listen because we're being told so much. But we are concurrently subject to more and more channels of information while we are putting more emphasis on individual choices. Another way to think about it is we've got more options to be less connected.

The printing press was really the first form of broadcasting. For the first time on a mass scale it separated the story from the storyteller. That was 500 short years ago. Since then we've gone through wires and over the air - from broadcasting to narrowcasting to "ego-casting" - everyone can watch what they want when they want to. Or create their own content if they think they can do better. Everyone will be famous for fifteen people. What we have here are weapons of mass distraction.

This forces us to be reductionist in our thinking. There is so much coming at us that we are interacting with the world in a more binary, on, off - if, then kind of way - look at your cellphone, your digital camera, your gaming console - binary choices - reflecting the digital ones and zeros inside the technology. This binary thinking permeates our world. So much information increases our desire to simplify our definitions of nearly everything. There's no time to read, argue or understand opposing points of view - you're either with us or against us - now we can move on.

Here's a little thought problem my dad poses: before you are born - as you're existing in some cosmic ether somewhere (or nowhere). You are given the opportunity to create whatever world you would like to be born into - political system, social system, job, family....

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

But then, you are told that you have no control over what place in this personal “utopia” you’re born into. What country, what class, what gender, what religion, what physical condition.

Well, that last half of the story is all of us. Who chose their life? I know I didn’t. You’ve come to hear me speak, really, because of who my father is. Of course I made plenty of my own choices. I can stand here and be articulate because I stayed in school (mostly) and I’ve certainly created my own career. And it’s not at all demeaning to be here because of my last name - I’m proud of my father’s character and accomplishments and also proud of my own choices in life – however wrongheaded or difficult some of them were. But I didn’t *know* this was going to be my life. I didn’t choose the circumstances I was born into. How many of us are the religion our parents are? And if we were born in India what religion would we be? Probably not Catholic or Protestant or Jewish...

We haven’t grown up as a child in Afghanistan, we haven’t been a parent in China. We haven’t been elders in Uganda. But just as they do, I’m sure that we’ve lived the lives we’ve been given the best we can. I would guess that *that* is a universal trait no different than a smile, that we do the best we can. But our motivations are entirely our own. And they are as different as every face you see.

This world is complex. You and I are complex. We cannot allow ourselves to be reduced to a single definition. Simply put, it’s how wars start. If you are a Christian or Jew or Muslim, you may also be a photographer, a father, a vegetarian, a hunter (and like long walks on the beach...). That’s why I love Myspace – it adds personal complexity to what has become an otherwise more black and white world – we need a lot more grey – or better yet, color. I want to believe that part of trying to do the best we can is leaving something better behind.

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

History so far gives us the sense that we're on some linear track – it shows linear progress in so many forms – science and technology in particular. But repetition in some form as well. And everything in nature is telling us that we actually do live in a cyclical world. Things are created, go dormant and start again. If civilizations have a cycle – as I believe they do - where are we in this cycle? Or is it more likely that we are experiencing multiple cycles – some just beginning, some coming to a close? How do we most gently move through these cycles so that coming generations don't feel the great upheaval that is often associated with great change?

Global climate, regional terrorism, nuclear proliferation, HIV/AIDS – all difficulties that have risen in these times – and they'll be replaced by others 100 years from now. How do we hand these issues off to the next generation? And can we make more room for a healthy, peaceful, hopeful world in the process? Maybe by living up to democracy's promise - by giving everyone a chance to be heard – giving people a chance to feel that their life has value - is a start. Basic human rights – access to food, health and education – this leads to engagement and hope. Is there a child that doesn't deserve that? Is it really true that we have to spend billions and billions of dollars on defending ourselves and not consider that the health of our communities and the education of our children are our very best defense? Whether it's the rising commercial strengths of India and China or the rising realities of global terrorism – the world will retain a level of stability only if its people feel engaged and have a glimmer of hope. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have a very effective way of recruiting. They approach a mother with hungry young children and offer her a bag of rice for one child. They will educate the child in their school and leave something to feed the others. It's an offer that is impossible to refuse. It represents a glimmer of hope...

## PETER BUFFETT TALK

We live in an unequal, unstable, unsustainable world. There must be a way to begin writing another history. If we can first embrace the idea that one cannot create an outer world that doesn't first live inside – that our thoughts and actions define our life and our lives are interconnected like never before. If we recognize that we are all complicated beings. And by recognizing the complexity we learn to respect each other - then we can allow more voices to feel heard and learn to respect what those voices have to say....– “ubuntu” – I am because you are. And you deserve basic things – no matter where you were born, what color your skin, what religion you practice, what language you speak. I'll paraphrase the Declaration of Independence – which I would guess the writers meant for anyone who could hear their voice. All people are of equal value. All people deserve to live healthy, free and hopeful lives.