

Friday, December 12, 2008

Main Section**training youth to be trustees of the earth**[DM Columns](#)[DM Video](#)[Front Page](#)[Breaking News](#)[Obituaries](#)[Provincial News](#)[Cartoon](#)[Features](#)[Sports](#)[Financial Times](#)[Opinion](#)[Editorial](#)[News](#)**Supplements**[Bank Portal](#)[Mirror Education](#)[Informant](#)[Mirror International](#)[WOW](#)[Rear Mirror](#)[Life](#)**Weekly Section**[Travel](#)[Family](#)[Health](#)[Letters](#)

The Weeramantry International Centre for Peace Education and Research (WICPER) recently held a successful Training for Trusteeship four-day residential workshop. The workshop was conducted at the SUBODHI Institute for Integral Education from November 27 – 30. Undergraduates who participated were drawn from universities across the country from Ruhuna to Jaffna and Colombo to Batticaloa. The students were selected from among outstanding students nominated by Vice Chancellors of the various universities. They constituted a representative cross section of future leaders of the country.

The seminar was held in conjunction with the Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO, the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) and the Public Diplomacy Section of the American Centre.

This is a pioneering workshop aimed at inculcating in the minds of young people, a realisation that we are all trustees for the future. The environmental problem has grown so urgent that the public at all levels has to be sensitised to the need for each individual to make a positive contribution towards addressing this problem.

The US Ambassador, His Excellency Robert Blake, observed in his message to the Workshop that "Emphasising the notion of trusteeship sends a powerful message. It reminds us that we are more than individual persons pursuing individual needs ... Through this workshop young people from across Sri Lanka will explore how they can become better "trustees" and how they can help others develop and implement this perspective into their lives and communities. This is a mindset that is critical to nurture and reinforce, not only in Sri Lanka but around the world."

There was also a video message from the founder of the World Future Council and the Right Livelihood Award - Alternative Nobel Prize, Mr. Jakob von Uexkull, setting out in detail our obligations to the environment and to future generations. He sent his best wishes for the success of this pioneering workshop.

Cross Cultural Perspectives

The students were addressed by religious personalities from all four religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The President of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Sarvarupananda spoke on Hinduism, Rev. Olande Ananda on Buddhism, Rev. Father Noel Dias, lecturer in public international law at the University of Colombo on Christianity and Samamanya-Deshabandu Al-Haj Niyas Moulavi, Director General of Ihasaniyyah Arabic College, Colombo, on Islam. The students were thus exposed to a solid base of cross cultural information on religious teachings regarding the environment and our duties towards future generations.

The participants were drawn from all groups and communities in the Island. There were Buddhists, Hindus Christians and Muslims and they all worked closely together on various projects.

Conceptual background

The concept of trusteeship, which was the theme of the workshop was explained in detail by Sri Lanka Abhimaneeya Judge Weeramantry, Founder of the Weeramantry Centre for Peace Education and Research (WICPER), who stressed that we are not owners of the environment and of earth resources, but only stewards and custodians for future generations, whose birthright we are not entitled to damage or plunder. He illustrated this from the teachings of all religions and traditional systems of law.

Judge Weeramantry also gave the undergraduates an overview of the major peace movements in history and the major philosophies of peace from the Greek and Hindu philosophers down to comparatively recent figures like Tolstoy, Aldous Huxley and Martin Luther King.

The participants were addressed at dinner by Justice Parinda Ranasinghe, former Chief Justice of Sri Lanka, on what they could do towards upholding and developing law and order. Mr. Sam Wijesinha, retired Secretary-General of Parliament and Chancellor of the Open University delivered a comprehensive address on the history of the franchise in England and Sri Lanka and on the obligations the universal franchise imposed on them.

Mr. R.P. Perera, Secretary-General, National Commission for UNESCO in Sri Lanka, spoke on education towards peace and sustainability in South Asia, and outlined the concept of sustainable development and its linkage to peace. He related these to the entire South Asian region and explained UNESCO's commitment to this concept, showing how the burden of trusteeship lay on every individual, and particularly the younger generation. Education to this end was vitally necessary.

Two former associates of WICPER, Ruwanthika Guneratne and Yuresha Fernando also spoke on environmental problems facing future generations and culture and trusteeship.

All these speakers gave students a clear understanding of the magnitude of the problems in these areas and of the steps that have been and can be taken towards their solution.

Practical Problems

In regard to practical problems, the students heard addresses on such topics as:

n Role of youth in the protection of coral reefs by Dr. A.A. Boaz, Director-General of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP). This address stressed the enormous multiple dangers of the damage now being done to coral reefs in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

nSolar energy for village

communities by Mr. Daya Senanayake, Patent Holder in Solar Energy Projects. Mr. Senanayake gave the students an overview of the sources of renewable energy in Sri Lanka and how these could be harnessed.

n Sustainable sanitation concepts by Ms. Constanze Windberg, Stockholm Environment Institute. The lecturer gave the students the benefit of her wide experience in this field and outlined the practical steps that needed to be taken in Sri Lanka.

n Rural community development and the philosophy of goodness by Mr. Kushil Gunasekara, Founder, Foundation of Goodness, who has worked extensively on rehabilitation of tsunami devastated areas and communities. This lecture was a source of inspiration to the students as to what each individual could do in this field.

Sri Lanka's Cultural Heritage

Judge Weeramantry outlined the remarkable achievements of the Sri Lankans in the past. Sri Lanka had, for example, the largest buildings of the ancient world next to the pyramids of Egypt, an irrigation system which, according to outstanding foreign observers, was the most sophisticated ever seen on the planet, the world's longest historical chronicle, the earliest public hospitals in the world and monastic universities nearly two thousand years ago, which attracted thousands of students from the entire region, and numerous other accomplishments. It could rise to its full stature again if young people had the necessary dedication to the welfare and upliftment of the country and it could rise resurgent once more to be an inspiration to the entire region as it had been in the past. The present generation are trustees of that cultural inheritance as well.

Problems of the Disadvantaged

On the opening day the participants were given a glimpse of what can be achieved by handicapped children through a profoundly moving dance recital by deaf and dumb children. These children are the inmates of the Dr. Reijntjes School for the Deaf, founded in 1984 by Mrs. Tineke de Silva-Nijkamp from the Netherlands, at which they are taught by dedicated teachers how they can overcome even the most major disabilities. This performance was an inspiration to all the young participants, showing them how much can be achieved if proper attention is paid to the disabled and the disadvantaged.

Raising the nation's moral fibre

The students were given a perspective on the high standards of idealism and self-sacrifice that do exist among some members of the community by Mr. Kasun Chandraratne, founder of the Foundation for Civilian Bravery, Sri Lanka, who spoke

about examples of heroism in the community which tend to pass unnoticed. Such examples raise the moral fibre of the nation and deserve recognition and encouragement.

The Foundation is now attracting international attention and shows how Sri Lanka can give leadership to the region in various ways, which link with our rich moral heritage. Interactive Workshops

There was also a series of interactive workshops among the students on what each individual could do to generate interest in his or her group towards their solution.

The 60 participants were divided into 6 groups of 10. Each group, which contained a mix of undergraduates from all universities, was required to come up with a detailed presentation of their views on a topic selected by them on "How to make our village green". The students made presentations on such topics as How to make university campuses environmentally conscious, How to solve the problem of polythene bag disposal and how to make the village school environmentally conscious.

They submitted detailed schemes in regard to these matters, with various innovative ideas as to how they could be implemented. They also expressed a resolve to carry these schemes into practical implementation when they left the camp. This could have a whole series of beneficial results through the country.

The proposals of the students were adjudged by a panel of judges and prizes were awarded to the best two team efforts. There was a tie for the second place and two prizes were awarded.

Social Events

There were also numerous social events and a camp bonfire combined with entertainment provided by each group. As the bonfire was lit there was a symbolic representation of the four corners of the island – north, south, east and west – by students from those geographical areas. This item was facilitated by the President's Scouts of Sri Lanka.

The social events assisted greatly in bringing together students from different regions and backgrounds.

Students left the workshop inspired with a resolve to carry into their respective groups and communities the knowledge and the practical ideas they had acquired during the workshop, and with a resolve to form a network among themselves to keep up the momentum generated by the workshop.

Meditation/Reflection

Sessions

Another interesting feature of the workshop was that each day commenced with a meditation/reflection session conducted by Rev. Father Mervyn Fernando, the founder of the SUBODHI Institute of Integral Education.

These sessions were aimed, inter alia, at giving students a sense of internal harmony with the environment and an instinctive desire to preserve and protect it. They also sought to instil a sense of total dependence upon the environment.

The Importance of

Individual Action

One of the prime messages conveyed at the workshop was that every individual could and should do something specific and that no one should feel that individual action was valueless in regard to such enormous issues. The students emerged from the workshop with a determination to do something themselves in the practical sphere as well as to communicate this knowledge as widely as possible.

Parting observations

of students

The students also had the advantage of bonding with students from all regions of the country and parted observing that they had formed friendships for life, apart from finding common causes on which they could work together in a spirit of idealism and service to Sri Lanka.

Prognoses for the future

The success of the camp, the cross-cultural understanding it generated, the bonding of students from different parts of the country and their commitment to a project to improve the environment of Sri Lanka and protect future generations – all these have provided much encouragement for the concept of a series of continuing workshops of the same nature. At these workshops other groups of students will be exposed to similar concepts and practical projects, and will help to disseminate these ideas throughout the community.

It is hoped that in time this pioneering concept of training students in trusteeship will be carried to a regional level and thereafter to an international level.

Another practical consequence of the workshop is that the different groups of students entrusted with particular projects will continue working on them and will report back to the Centre on the steps they have taken and the successes they have achieved. Yet another impact of the camp will be the multiplier effect of the educational programmes the trainees will conduct in their own particular groups to spread the message and the inspirations of the concept of trusteeship.

It is also hoped to establish a linkage of all Training for Trusteeship participants so that they will want to bond together in the cause improving Sri Lanka's future. This can be a powerful source of benefit to the country. It is hoped to collect some of the diverse talks presented to the students in the form of a publication.

In short the residential workshop has raised great hopes of increasing the sensitivity of youth to their obligations to the environment, to the community and to the generations yet to come. It fills an important lacuna in our education system and through the action of concerned students this message can be carried to the entire community at every level, starting from the school room and moving upwards through universities to public life in general.

The enthusiasm shown by the students to work in this cause was also an important indication of the valuable resources available for this purpose in the form of student effort and idealism. Workshops such as this serve to harness that enthusiasm in the cause of national upliftment, breaking through all barriers of race, language, religion and other divisive factors. The message is urgent, the need is vital and time is running out.

A series of educational workshops of this sort is an imperative need and the workshop just concluded with potential future leaders of the country, provides a useful blueprint for this form of educational activity.

Educational materials for this purpose need also to be devised and the satchel of materials given to each of the students contains much that can be used for this purpose.

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