



## Interview with Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, Co-President of the Club of Rome

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In this installment of the series “Building a Culture of Peace II” we interview Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, Co-President of the Club of Rome. She is the first woman to serve as Co-President, as well as the first African, and in the interview she discusses the unprecedented crisis our world is facing at this moment, the lessons she learned in her struggle against the white separatist Apartheid socio-economic and political system in her native South Africa, and numerous other topics.

### **What are your thoughts on the present state of our world, from the global COVID-19 pandemic to recent extreme weather events and environmental disasters?**

The human race is facing a planetary emergency. But I also believe that moments of crises such as these present a rare opportunity for making fundamental changes in human behavior.

We can no longer ignore the reality that continuing to live as we do today exceeds the capacity of our Mother Earth to sustain us. People are finally coming to realize that our excessive extraction of natural resources, our consumption-driven lifestyles, and our culture of material consumption has also damaged us inside, harming us spiritually.

Now is the time to look inside ourselves and reflect on our behavior and our consumption patterns that surpass the regenerative powers of nature, and to correct our failure to learn from nature. Changing our behavior is something all of us can and must do. Change starts from the individual, from each of us.

We also need to awaken to the fact that we are all connected. In Africa we have the concept of ubuntu, the conviction that you are only human in relation to other human beings. That it is our essence as human



*Dr. Mamphela Ramphele*

beings to be good, to take care of ourselves, to take care of others, and to have a sense of empathy.

People are interconnected and interdependent. You cannot be happy when other people around you are suffering. You can't enjoy wealth when others are poor. What has gone wrong with our planet is the extraction of wealth by a few at the expense of the many, and the extraction of wealth at the expense of nature, which is a life-giving force. COVID-19 has taught us that you can't be healthy unless other people around you are healthy. COVID has shown that inequality is dangerous, it's life threatening to both the rich and the poor.



The important thing in life is not how many cars you own or how many trips on an airplane you have taken. The important thing is this precious life we all possess. We need to treasure life, to treasure well-being, to treasure our human relationships, and to treasure our Mother Earth. That's the consciousness we all need to have.

**It is reported that your homeland of South Africa has been more adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than other African nations.**

It is a quarter-century since apartheid, the government policy enforcing white superiority and discrimination against black people, was brought to an end in South Africa.

The new South African constitution placed human rights at the center, and people expected it would bring about a new and ideal society. But in fact, even after the overthrow of apartheid, the rich remain rich and the poor remain poor.

Though different people occupy the seats of government today, many of them are corrupt like their predecessors. The government may have changed, but the people in it have not undergone the human revolution required for leaders to be public servants. They are continuing to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority population that remains poor and disempowered. Like the former oppressors they have failed to provide such basic public services as quality health services, education, and social and physical infrastructure.

COVID-19 has brought these social failings to the fore. Our infection rates are very high right now, and we are experiencing a national crisis due to the lack of the essential amenities to enable social distancing, properly ventilated living spaces, and the failure to adhere to hygiene requirements, such as handwashing. Those who have no food at home have no choice but to brave the chance of infection just to survive. We cannot tell them to stay home and starve. Some poor people are reacting with violent protests, and this is an expression of the frustration of people who feel their humanity is being trampled upon.

**At last year's conference of the Club of Rome you stressed the need for human revolution, referring to the dialogue between Club of Rome Founder Aurelio Peccei and SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, in the book *Before It Is Too Late*. What drew your attention to this idea?**

Over the past fifty years, the Club of Rome has done a wonderful job of sounding the alarm about the need for sustainability, starting with the publication of *The Limits to Growth* in 1972. However it has been unable to achieve a significant shift from our destructive patterns of consumption as a human community. When I was preparing to host the Club of Rome conference, I looked for a message to communicate, and I came across this book.

When I read about human revolution promoted by Dr. Aurelio Peccei and SGI President Ikeda in the book, I realized that human revolution is the key to enabling the human race to overcome the planetary emergencies and crises we are facing. The only way to emerge from these emergencies is for each one of us to confront our actions that are disrupting the web of life that ensures harmony. We need to change our behavior.

I believed it was important for the Club of Rome to discuss this concept of human revolution as a critical factor in working toward the emergence of a new human civilization built by those who have gone through this process of human revolution.

The principle of human revolution also brought to mind my struggle and the struggle of my generation for freedom in South Africa.

Initially we were focusing on fighting against the apartheid system. But we realized in the late 1960s that actually the real revolution starts inside each of us. For four hundred years the peoples of Africa were oppressed and branded as inferior. The system of apartheid was simply an extension and an extreme form of earlier colonialism.

The Black Consciousness Movement was aimed at liberating our minds from any feelings of inferiority, freeing ourselves from fear of our oppressor and



awakening to our worth and dignity as human beings. When we talk about liberation of mind, it's not just about being free from racism, it's also being free from sexism and free from economic oppression.

It was a human revolutionary journey. Who am I? How do I see myself after all these centuries of my ancestors being told that they are inferior? How do I regain my dignity? How do I forgive those who treated me badly? And how do I forgive myself for having acquiesced to that treatment?

Through that spiritual struggle, we realized that we are as good as anybody, anywhere, and we stood up and we said, "We are black and we are proud!" For us the Black Consciousness Movement was indeed a movement of human revolution. Likewise, it offered the opportunity for white people to engage in human revolution, as they were also damaged by apartheid. To think of yourself as superior and separate from other human beings is a handicap.

**You had a close relationship with human rights champion and later South African President Nelson Mandela.**

Mandela was a man who had achieved his human revolution. When I first met him in July 1988, he was a prisoner and yet he walked with such stately dignity. His behavior on that day exemplified his outstanding character. He was so much in charge of who he was that he never gave the wardens the opportunity to give him instructions. What he did was to respect them in their role. He welcomed me in a warm, fatherly manner, and he treated me as an equal.

Toward the end of our conversation, when we had about ten minutes left of the time allotted for the visit, he stood up and said: "We must not make the officials wait for us. I hope you understand. They have been very generous, and they have given us this time. Let's wind down our conversation now." By respecting them, he made them respect him.

He was a man who listened carefully. Even when he disagreed with what you were saying, he let you speak to the end without interrupting. Only then might he say, "Yes, but perhaps there's another way

of looking at this." He was a remarkable human being, complete as a human being. That is why in my view he could negotiate so effectively and lead in such challenging times. Because there were many times during the negotiation period that we could have fallen into the abyss.

Mandela, the man, was a person who was totally at peace with himself, very aware of his strengths, and he led with them. He was aware of his weaknesses, but he managed his weaknesses by playing to his strengths.

Mandela's life of solitude in prison shaped his character. Pain is like fire. It can reduce you to ash or forge you into steel. He became like steel.

He loved people, he really loved people. It was remarkable how he would remember people's names, even if he'd just met them once. His strength was wrapped in a very warm, human touch.

**You have also served as Vice Chancellor (de facto Chancellor) of the University of Cape Town and Managing Director of the World Bank. Where did you find the strength to be such a pioneer after having experienced harsh oppression, banishment, and the death of loved ones under apartheid?**

As a child I was cared for by my father's grandmother. She was widowed very young, and was a powerful, incredibly smart woman who lived to be over a hundred. My grandmother on my mother's side as well as my own mother were also strong women. I was very influenced by these strong women.

And my father, who was an elementary school principal, always used to tell me, "Don't compete with other children, compete with yourself. God has given you brains, so use those brains."

Because of my family, I grew up into a very confident young woman. I entered medical school, which was very rare for women at the time, and then took part in the Black Consciousness Movement, both of which strengthened my mind, my heart, and my spirit.

When I became Vice Chancellor (de facto Chancellor)



of the University of Cape Town, the dominance of white males was very strong. Instead of fighting them, I proposed that we work together to make Cape Town a world-class African university. I gave them my full support and worked hard to raise the funding needed to reach that goal, making every effort to enable each of them to tap into the best in themselves.

The culture at the World Bank was completely different. Most of those working there found it inconceivable that an African woman could hold such a high position at the bank. The best way of dealing with that was to make sure I always did the right thing. I supported the president who at the time was fighting against old liberal economic approaches to introduce strong programs for human development. The President, Mr. James Wolfensohn, was in turn very supportive of me. It was a struggle, but I learned a lot, traveled a lot, and met very exciting people.

Then when I returned to South Africa, I faced a still very male-dominated society that continued to fail to promote prosperity for all and respect for human rights and dignity. My response was to found a citizen's movement focusing on empowering the youth and poor men and women especially in rural areas. Five years ago I co-founded ReimagineSA to promote the human revolution we referred to above. I realized that my fellow citizens have yet to free themselves from the bondage of racism, sexism, and authoritarianism that undermines human dignity and public-spirited leadership rather than self-serving politics and private accumulation of wealth. At present I sit on the board of ReimagineSA and see myself in a role as a bridge between my generation that fought for freedom and the younger generations that need to make our dreams of a shared prosperous future a living reality for all. Young people are rising to their leadership roles and demanding to be part of the change to promote more well-being for all people and the planet.

Africa is the youngest continent, with 60 percent of its population of 1.3 billion below the age of 45. I am thoroughly enjoying this project, working with youth to tap into that tremendous energy.

### **What has been your guiding vision as Co-President of the Club of Rome?**

The Club of Rome has adopted a thematic work program with five themes:

- Planetary Emergency Action Plan
- Reframing of Economics
- Rethinking Finance
- Emerging New Civilization through human revolution
- Youth Leadership and InterGenerational conversations to shape the future.

I believe that peace starts inside you. If you are not at peace, you cannot be a peacemaker. If you are not at peace, you cannot have peace in your home, your community, or your country. Peace is not the absence of war; it is a state of harmony.

The true value is life. It is well-being. What gives us joy is seeing other people joyful. The new human civilization that we want to emerge will be the result of working together as a human race to change the way we think and our values. That is how we build a culture of peace.

I intend to dedicate the remainder of my life to having conversations with the next generation, to be a bridge so that young people can take charge of shaping the future we want to see, shaping a new human civilization through promoting human revolution. ■