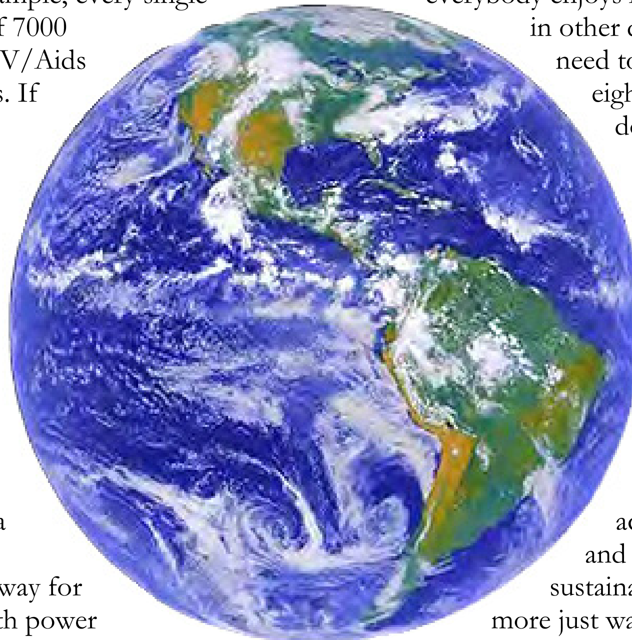
Witness, Wisdom and Justice

Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International, spoke about the struggle for social justice in the context of rapid climate change.

My dear brothers and sisters, the moment of world history we are living in can be described as 'a perfect storm'. What we have seen over the last three years has been a convergence of a range of crises that have hit humanity repeatedly in the solar plexus, one after the other. First, three years ago, we had the fuel price crisis. And, as you all know, when we have a fuel price crisis, a food price crisis usually follows immediately. And it was just two years ago that sixty countries had food riots as a result of hikes in food price. Even though, by the way, fuel prices came down, food prices didn't come down proportionately after the fuel prices dropped. Then, we have an ongoing poverty crisis, which takes the lives of 50,000 men and children every single day – from preventable causes. It is important that we understand the poverty crisis we face. On my continent, for example, every single day this crisis takes the lives of 7000 people by malaria, 6000 by HIV/Aids and 1500 or so by tuberculosis. If you want to put this in a common global narrative on the time we live in, you could say that it's the equivalent of five September 11ths every single day – in terms of loss of human life.

I want to put it to you that the poverty crisis is not simply a sad situation, a tragic situation, an unfortunate situation; the poverty crisis is a daily silent tsunami or passive genocide that has been under way for such a long time and those with power who can make the difference, both in developing and developed countries, have not exercised the leadership, courage, wisdom and morality that this calls for. We have now the climate crisis and, according to Kofi Annan's global humanitarian forum, in 2008 alone we can now document 300,000 dying directly from climate impacts. It is important, therefore, that we understand that it was only when the financial crisis hit, that the most powerful of our political leaders both in government and in business really stood up and said: 'We are in a crisis and we need to do something different'. But let's look for a moment at how they have responded to the crisis. Let's just think about the world we live in for a few minutes more.



We don't have a planet B

According to United Nations' development programme, what Western Europe and North America spend on pet food annually could provide the entire African continent with three nutritional meals per day; what the European Union spends daily on subsidising every European cow to the tune of two Euros a day is more than most people on this planet have to survive on a daily basis. I have got nothing against cows or pets: the issue is this deep structural inequality that manifests itself time and time again when we look at how out of balance our world is between those richer and poorer parts. This has to be addressed with a level of moral courage that we have not seen.

The WWF – the World Wildlife Fund – points out that if we were to deliver the quality of life that everybody enjoys in, say, the United Kingdom or in other developed countries, we would need to have the equivalent of six to eight planets. The problem is, we don't have a plan B in terms of addressing this accumulation of crises, with the climate crisis driving things rapidly forward. We don't have a plan B, because, quite frankly, we don't have a planet B. This is the one planet we have: a finite reality. This situation must now challenge us into thinking about how we actually deliver to our children and grandchildren a more sustainable, a more peaceful and a more just way of living for the future. When we think about poverty, it is very important that we actually understand the contradictions in terms of how poverty manifests itself.

As an African, I can tell you that it pains me when people talk about Africa as a basket case. When Tony Blair said that Africa was the scar on the conscience of humanity – people judge him differently: some think he is serious about making a difference, others say that he was trying to rehabilitate his Iraq war image – but irrespective of what his intention was, the reality of even those that sought and seek to support Africa and other parts of the developing world has often been done in a paternalistic way, which does not exude

solidarity and a sense of common humanity. So, when we think about Africa, I say that Africa is one of the richest continents underneath the ground and precisely because we're one the richest continents underneath the ground, we're one of the poorest continents above the ground. It is great to see the focus now on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill – the tragedy that it is – but ask yourself, why we haven't heard as much about the Niger Delta oil spill, which has been going on for years and years and years, when both the actual quantity of the spillage and its impact have been significantly higher than what we have seen in the Gulf. Shell has not paid compensation anywhere like as high as the compensation BP is going to pay to the residents of Louisiana and so on. Obviously, BP should pay this money, but is the value of the human beings living on the Gulf of Mexico coastline any greater than the value of those that live on the Niger Delta environments?

trillions to bail out the banks – not a fraction of that to help poor countries

It is important that, right now, we – the people who are concerned about justice and social justice – continue to tell the story of where injustice is happening, and to tell it in honest ways, even if telling those stories actually puts our lives in danger and calls upon us to make sacrifices. So when we think about the climate crisis, specifically, you might have heard that last year, in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit, religious groups, trade unions, NGOs and so on all worked together to deliver what we called a fair, ambitious and binding treaty – in short what we called a 'FAB' treaty, not a fabulous treaty but a fair, ambitious and binding treaty. Sadly, what we got was a 'FLAB' treaty, pardon my French. What we got was a treaty full of loopholes. But around Copenhagen, people started to talk about climate injustice, or about climate justice as their demand. The thinking behind that demand was this: people in poor countries have been the least responsible for the climate catastrophe that we find ourselves in, but they are the ones who are paying the first and most brutal price for it. I'm sure most of you know about the genocide in Dafur. When the genocide in Dafur is projected in the global media, it's solely seen as an ethnic conflict, but actually the biggest driver of the Dafurian conflict is water scarcity and land scarcity – with ethnicity being manipulated in that context, as we have seen in so many different conflicts around the world.

I never thought I would start a sentence the way I am going to start my next one. I strongly support the CIA and the Pentagon when they say that climate change is probably the biggest threat to safety and security in the future. If we think that today's wars are being fought about oil, if we do not get it right and if we do not find a way in which we can share this planet in a more equitable way then, sadly, I must say that what we will end up with, is a catastrophe that will mean that many of the values we hold will be violated.

So, when we witness the world in that way, what wisdom, then, should we bring to it? I want to just quote Albert Einstein, when he once said: 'When you are addressing a big problem, don't use the same thinking, logic and framework that got you into the problem in the first place.' Responding to the financial crisis, our political leaders did not respond to the convergence of all these crises coming together. And one of the things we have to push back against is treating each of these crises as stand-alone, un-interconnected crises. For example, the inter-connections between poverty and the environment are obvious. We need to see the connection between gender equality and climate change, because if climate change is going to be a driver of war and conflict, we know that in war and conflict it is women and children who pay the biggest price. Of course, there is a connection when we think about gender equality and women's rights. You can make any number of connections. But our political leaders decided they could say to the world that they would find not millions, not billions, but *trillions* of dollars to bail out the banks, the bankers and the bonuses – the very folks who actually contributed to getting us into the mess in the first place. At the same time, they could not find a fraction of that money to help poor countries who – in the Pacific island states, in parts of Africa and so on – already have to to think about moving people who are in the process of becoming climate refugees.

What wisdom do we take from the world we witness right now? A key question that we have to ask ourselves is: how do we make change happen in a way that will secure this planet for our children and the future? What does history teach us? If we look at all the major injustices that humanity has faced over time, whether it was slavery, whether it was apartheid, whether it was a woman's right to choose, whether it was the civil rights movement in the United States, all only began to be addressed when decent men and women said: 'Enough is enough and no more' and were willing to step up to the plate and say, as Nelson Mandela said as he went to court: 'The struggle to end racial discrimination is a cause I am prepared to live for and, if needs be, it's a cause I am prepare to die for.' And if you think about all the struggles, colonialism included, it took Rosa Parkes, the African-American woman who helped liberate those that lived in slavery in the United States, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Junior and a range of other people

who were willing to put their lives on the line. Importantly, at the time when they were willing to put their lives on the line, they were called terrorists, communists and a whole range of other derogatory words. Today, it's very interesting that, in South Africa for example, you'll struggle to find a single white South African in South Africa who actually supported apartheid! I mean you just can't find anybody; I don't know how that system survived!

We have to ask ourselves: how does change happen? And if I look at the struggle against apartheid, I can say that one of the critical success factors of that struggle was that people of faith and people who were secular were able to come together and find common ground. I would say that as a 15-year-old high school student, I was expelled from school for engaging in a protest against apartheid education; I should confess that we didn't really understand much as 15-year-olds, but we knew enough. When we drove in a bus to school from our townships to the centre of town, we passed white neighbourhoods where we would see really nice schools with grass on the ground and that kind of stuff – things that you never had in the townships. And so we had enough. (On a lighter note, the slogan at the front of the march in 1980, the first protest I participated in, was: 'We want equality.' By the time the slogan got to the back of the march, the young folks at the back of the march were shouting: 'We want a colour TV!') But be that as it may, with the limited knowledge that we had, we got involved and I remember how I felt at that stage: a young 15-year-old, angry and somewhat militant. Then we were expelled from school for engaging in that protest. There was a public meeting, called by some of our leaders, to launch a campaign to get us reinstated in school. There was a priest called Rev Paddy Carney, and the law the government had just passed was a law saying that if you burnt the South African flag you would get five to fifteen years in prison. Paddy Carney gave the speech, which is one that I hold dear in my heart, because it was the speech that shifted me away from thinking that the struggle was between white and black, and got me to think that it was between injustice and justice. He said, very eloquently: 'What is a flag? A flag is nothing more than a representation of the government.' Then he said: 'What is a human being? A human being is nothing more than a representation of God on Earth.' And then he said: 'If this government violates the representations of God on Earth every single day in a thousand different ways, what right does it have to expect anybody to honour the apartheid regime's flag?'

But what I saw in my activism days in South Africa was that the faith community provided us with courage, with moral leadership, with confidence actually to stand up against one of the most brutal regimes. I want to suggest to you right now that we have the opportunity to stand up and be counted. I think that the faith community is already engaging in the struggles of poverty, as they have been doing for a long time, but they have only embraced the issue of climate change quite intensively over the last decade. I could take you religion, by religion, by religion, but for lack of time, all I would say is that whether it's Buddhism, or Islam, or different parts of Christianity, things are happening in the faith community. There is a simple reason for that. In all our scriptures – whether it's our holy books from Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism – you can find very clear guidance, in the context of taking care of what God has created, that we should be treating all form of human life – all forms of life, not only us as humans – with much more dignity and respect.

Nelson Mandela walks free from prison

The reason I was so keen to come to this meeting was to sharpen my own thinking. But I also wanted to say that I do not believe that Greenpeace, WWF, Friends of the Earth and all the more secular-oriented environmental organisations can succeed on their own. They have been twenty years ahead in terms of warning us, but the politicians have not heeded those warnings. Neither has the corporate sector. One of the reasons they have not felt the need to heed is because, I think, the voices of the faith community were not strongly heard in those debates, even though it has now started happening. I think that we have to ensure that people like myself, who are in the secular part of social justice movements, have to open up more space for our brothers and sisters in the faith communities. Not only to participate, but to be part of the leadership, moving forward.

This brings me to my third wisdom: what history teaches us. How do we get our politicians to listen to us? We write to them; when there are elections, we vote. But sadly, in many countries round the world, when people go to vote in elections today, they are not going to vote for the best candidate, they are going to vote for the least bad candidate. People are not enthused about formal electoral democracy today, and so we march peacefully, if we get permission to march in certain societies. We hold rock concerts. We hold prayer meetings. We hold bake sales. We do house-to-house lobbying to educate people, but here's the reality: throughout world history, there are very few instances where those that held power gave it away voluntarily. It is only, history teaches us, when people are willing to engage in civil disobedience, when they are willing to break the law peacefully, if necessary, that change actually happens. It might not have happened, for example, if Mahatma Gandhi hadn't led the salt march, with waves of people marching peacefully in India, only to get beaten by the British authorities. But that image went around the world and outraged global public opinion, even at that time, minus email, Twitter, Facebook and all the other new gadgetries that we have to deal with these days.

appealing to our brothers and sisters in the United States to wake up and smell the coffee

So, I will tell you what a CEO of one of the biggest companies in the world just said to me two months ago, because he is someone who gets it. I shouldn't embarrass him and I also shouldn't alert the security police services in different parts of the world by telling who he is. But he has agreed to get arrested with me in an act of civil obedience to get the message across. The significance of that is that we have to think out of the box. We have to think about new allies. I am very serious when I say that the Pentagon and the CIA, or elements therein, actually get climate change much better than the Congress of the United States does. And even though I know I will take criticism – and I have taken criticism in the eight months that I have been at Greenpeace – I am committed to dialogue with those with whom we have not spoken before, because the scale of the problems that we face is much, much too large for anyone of us to kid ourselves that government is going to do it alone, that business is going to do it alone, or that civil society is going to do it alone.

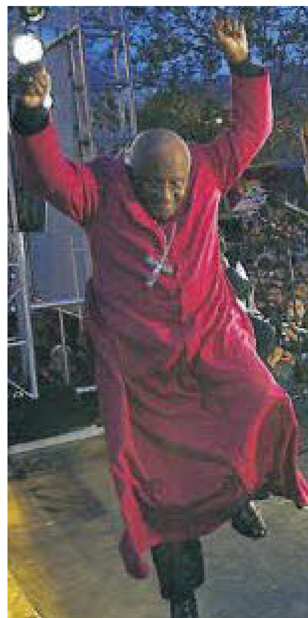
I have this vision that we have to get organised, and that we have to be able to put pressure on those most powerful governments that are holding back progress. I will just tell you about a quick conversation I had with Al Gore two months ago. I was trying to figure out how we can actually shift the agenda in the United States, because the United States is 4% of the world's population, they put about 25% of the harmful global greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, and they are the ones who are dragging their feet the most in terms of committing to ambitious targets. So I was asking Al Gore what we can do from the outside to support the dynamic, to get good legislation in the United States. And he said, 'You know, Kumi, I know you are at Greenpeace now, so I am not saying Greenpeace should do it, but one of the things that could work, that could have value, is if we could have religious communities going to US embassies and holding candlelight vigils overnight, appealing to our brothers and sisters in the United States to wake up and smell the coffee and get with the programme. That would be helpful right now and important.' Greenpeace can organise it and have a thousand people round embassies. But why would the people of the United Stated feel moved just by Greenpeace doing it? It's very different when religious leaders step forward and make their appeal.

Now I am going to talk a little bit personally. I just wanted to share one personal thing with you about my own relationship with religion and spirituality. I was very privileged to grow up in a poor working-class township, which nevertheless had a multi-religious culture. We had people of Christian, Muslim and Hindu faith and, of course, when you had that kind of combination in apartheid South Africa at that time, you always had quite aggressive attempts at converting folks, particularly from Hinduism and Islam into different parts of Christianity. And when I was about 11 years old, I remember a teacher, who was rather enthusiastic about this kind of evangelical type of proselytising, saying in class: 'My God doesn't ask for chickens', because you know how in Hinduism you slaughter chickens at certain rituals. He said, 'My God doesn't ask for chickens, my God doesn't ask for sheep, my God doesn't ask for cows. You should all convert to Christianity.' And I went home and I said – because I loved this teacher, he was one of my favourite teachers and I was being brought up as a Hindu – I went over and said to my mum, quite traumatised: 'Ma, my favourite teacher says Christianity is the best religion and we are being brought up as Hindus.' And my mum said to me: 'All religions are the same. The only thing you need to know about religion, if you want advice from me, is just think about these two things: see God in the eyes of every human being that you meet. If you can see God in the eyes of every human being that you meet, you don't need to bother whether you are a Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim or whatever. And always look

at the weaknesses in yourself and look at the strengths in others.' Sadly, my mum committed suicide four years after that, when I was 15 years old. But the wisdom she shared with me is something that has made me a bit of a unique and odd person within secular movements. I've only joined Greenpeace recently, but in all the movements that I've been involved in, I have always been a voice saying we must work with our brothers and sister in the religious community. And it doesn't matter that we don't agree on everything.

I will give you a quick anecdote. You might remember the 'Make Poverty History' campaign from 2005? The global part of that is the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, and I was the founding chair of the global part of the campaign. We were having a meeting a year after the 'Make Poverty History' campaign in 2006 in Beirut, Lebanon, where suddenly there was a huge conflict between the religious folks and the women's movement. In 2005, it was OK to be silent on a woman's right to choose in terms of reproductive rights, in terms of abortion; in 2006, the dynamic changed and they wanted language in the global manifesto that was more explicit and articulated reproductive rights. Now, most of the folks from the faith groups at this meeting personally supported a woman's right to choose. But if they stayed in that meeting and agreed a clear language supporting reproductive rights, they would still have to go back to their respective religious organisations – and there they would hear that explicit language would mean they had to withdraw from the group. Interestingly, most of the representatives at the meeting were women from the faith groups, but they were usually going back to report to some male leadership. So the whole conference – 400 people, all from different parts of the world, from all continents – had to decide how to keep folks together. With a few others I came up with an idea: 'Five people from the women's groups and five people from the religious groups go into that room and don't come out until they have worked out a way to keep all of us together.' The women's movement wanted reproductive rights, the Global Call to Action supported reproductive rights; the faith groups wanted no reference of it. They emerged one hour later and said they agreed and that they had found a way forward. They came up with language that said the Global Call to Action Against Poverty supports reproductive health. It was less than what the feminists wanted, more than what the faith groups wanted, but they could live with it.

The bottom line is: if we are going to advance social justice, we have to focus more and more on the much larger number of things that unite us, and learn to disagree on the smaller number of things that disunite us. Let's be clear, even in terms of very firm articles of faith and behaviour, these things are not set in stone. They are actually changing over time. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is somebody I love and respect and I have been privileged to work with – I don't know whether you heard the news, just last week he announced his retirement from public life. I'll bet anyone in this audience: don't take that seriously. It was very moving for me when, just before I started at Greenpeace, I had to lead a campaign and go on a hunger strike to put pressure on my government in South Africa to change its policy with regard to Zimbabwe. Archbishop Desmond Tutu stood with me throughout that hunger strike. He fasted once a week with us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu also went on public television in South Africa finally and said: 'I would prefer if young people and older people did not have sex outside a firm committed relationship, but should you choose to, please wear a condom.' Now, that's not something you would have thought the Archbishop of Cape Town – the leader of the Anglican Church in South Africa – would actually go on television and do; you wouldn't have thought about that 20 year ago, but circumstances do sometimes call for realism.



Archbishop Tutu dancing

When I started at Greenpeace I was discussing: What is your vision? What are you going to change? I said one of the things we are going to do is work more closely with the religious folks. And people asked: 'Why?' I said: 'Well actually, they've got the best sense of humour of any groups that I've worked with.' I say this half jokingly, but you would be surprised at how earnest folks in secular civil society are about what we do. There are extreme levels of earnestness. It takes a guy like Archbishop Desmond Tutu… There was once a march, when Nelson Mandela was still in prison, to call for his release – it was a very famous march, led by our religious leadership and some academics. Archbishop Tutu was in the front of the march, with all of them wearing their religious garb and so on, and then he linked hands, he discovered, with a white South African English professor, a guy who taught English Literature, called Michael Savage. So television and all are on this march and Tutu realises that he's got his arms round Mike Savage and says: 'Hey Mike, good to see you and glad you're on this march.' Mike is marching with his academic gown on, and then Bishop

Tutu says on television, radio and so on, 'Yes, Mike, we savages, we must stick together.'

When I speak to young people, I say that activism for justice is not a chore, it is a calling, an opportunity to build friendships, to give meaning to your life and to know that one day when you die, when somebody asks you just before you die, 'Have you tried to make a difference?' you should be able to say, 'Yes, I did.'

So, in conclusion, I want to end with one more anecdote, which is a little bit sad, but it's intended to be inspirational. When I was 22 years old, I was fleeing South Africa into exile and my best friend at that time, a guy called Lenny Naidoo, asked me a question. He said, 'What is the biggest contribution to the cause of justice?' I said, 'That is a very easy question – giving your life.' And he said 'You mean participating in a demonstration, getting shot and killed and becoming a martyr?' I said, ' I guess so, something like that.' He replied, 'That's the wrong answer. It's not giving your life, but giving the rest of your life.' I was 22 years old at the time, my friend Lenny was way ahead of his time, I mean he got climate change, he got environmentalism; he was quite special. So we fled into exile in different directions. Less than two years later, my friend Lenny and three young women from my home city were brutally murdered by the apartheid regime. There were so many bullets in their bodies that their parents couldn't recognise them at the mortuary. I had to think deep and hard about what he was trying to say in that message, with that distinction between giving your life and giving the rest of life. What he was saying is that the struggle for justice, the struggle for gender equality, for sustainability, to eradicate poverty, these struggles are marathons, and they are not sprints. For those who have the luxury to be able to participate in these struggles for a more fair and just world, the biggest contribution we can make is maintaining a lifetime of commitment, engagement and perseverance – until these struggles have been won, and until these injustices have been eradicated from the face of the Earth.

But here's the problem. In essence, what he was saying was the struggle is a marathon, not a sprint. But the problem is, we don't have time any more for a marathon. The science is telling us that if we don't get emissions to peak by 2015, latest 2020, we have catastrophic runaway climate change that threatens the future of human life, not just plant and animal life; we as a species are threatened. When he received the Nobel Peace Prize, Al Gore evoked an African proverb when he said: 'If you want to go far, go together. If you want to go quickly, go alone.' My dear brothers and sisters, we do not have a choice. We all, whether we are from faith organisations, from secular civil society, from progressive business, from governments, we have now to realise that the choice before us is to be able to move far and quickly at the same time. If we fail to do that, future generations will judge all of us as people who had the voice, the ability to make a difference. They will judge us extremely harshly.

Kumi Naidoo is Executive Director of Greenpeace. This is an edited version of the talk he gave at the SOF Annual conference in Leicester. Recorded and transcribed by Oliver Essame.

Lunching by the Sea of Galilee

'Swimming strictly prohibited'
proclaims the board in three languages.
Walking on the water's not mentioned,
but there's something beyond the natural here.
The lunch is heavenly and the waiter
celebrates his tip by discus-hurling
a slab of bread over the broadwalk rail.
'For the fish!' Slim green shivers
gather to bite and fight and – plop –
the bread is gone.

This is peace. A surprising breeze,
swallows swooping low, an avocet
circling ever wider, the Tiberias
rowing club teaching thin, young arms
to pull and feather, and this sea
stretching away to a hazy shore –
and hills which hide the real world
of lookout posts, border guards, ominous
reports of weapons of mass evil.

A certain person came this way,
advising the fishermen,
and slept in their boat,
preaching peace and – as they said –
casting his bread upon the waters.
But there were sharks here then, quick
to seize anyone rising to take the bait –
guardian sharks ensuring two thousand
years without peace,
constantly breeding, constantly evolving.
They are still here, somewhere,
hidden in the haze.

David Perman

David Perman runs the Rockingham Press in Ware, which publishes poetry and local history. His latest collection is *A Wasp on the Stair* (2003). He is a member of SOF.