

The Value of Values

by William E. Kirwan

Chancellor, University System of Maryland


Tenth Annual Lecture

The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace

Center for International Development and
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Good evening to all of you. What a tremendous honor and privilege it is for me to be asked to deliver the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace 10th Annual Lecture.

As you might imagine, I want to begin my comments by recognizing my good friend Suheil Bushrui and the creation of the Bahá'í Chair. I remember the day so vividly (has it really been eleven years?) when Irv Goldstein, Judge Nelson and I, along with literally hundreds of supporters, formally established the Bahá'í Chair and installed Suheil as the first incumbent. At the ceremony, I recall talking about how indebted the University was to the members of the Bahá'í Faith for supporting the creation of this Chair. I remember Irv talking about the promise this new position held as a force for furthering the cause of inclusion, mutual respect, and peaceful co-existence, on the campus and across the world. Above all, I will never forget how proud and fortunate we were to have you, Suheil, as the first Chair holder.

As I am certain all of you know, in his capacity as Chair, Suheil has been a champion of cultural understanding, tolerance, and diversity. He develops programs that promote unity among the peoples of the world, writes on non-violent alternatives to conflict resolution, and gives courses and lectures that enable greater spiritual awareness within our community and beyond. His scholarly pursuits into art, religion, philosophy, poetry, and literature have given him an exceptional breadth of insight and comprehension and they have earned him the admiration of leading scholars around the world. Amazingly, in this one person – Suheil Bushrui – we find the attributes of scholarship, spirituality, compassion, and wisdom. As anyone who has been blessed with the gift of time with Professor Bushrui will tell you, his towering intellect is matched only by his genuine selflessness and his unconditional kindness. It is impossible for those of us associated with the university to express the extent of our gratitude and appreciation for the contributions of, as he likes to say, this “simple camel driver.”

Of course, the University of Maryland community is not alone in its admiration for Suheil. He has received many international awards and prizes. Just last month, for example, he was honored with the Juliet Hollister Award from the New York-based Temple of Understanding. Professor Bushrui joins such remarkable individuals as Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Queen Noor of Jordan as a recipient of this award. Noting his “exceptional service to interfaith understanding,” this global interfaith organization acknowledged Suheil’s contributions as an educator, writer, lecturer, and spiritual leader.

In many ways, the essence of Suheil’s work – the aspects that lead to this impressive award and that underpin his work as the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace – can be seen as proceeding along two complimentary and parallel themes: the commonalities of all religions and the essential oneness of the human family. A cursory review

of the “story” of the Bahá’í Chair – as an instrument of teaching, activism, and advocacy – reveals the pervasive nature of this simple, yet eloquent, vision.

Soon after becoming the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace Professor, Suheil created a new course for honors students, “The Spiritual Heritage of the Human Race,” which studies the world’s religions from the perspective of a universal spiritual heritage. It establishes the foundation for further exploration into the commonality among the world’s faiths in pursuit of a truly global spiritual ethic. This course requires students to think, engage, and interact from an entirely new perspective. It quickly became a favorite among the honors students. Indeed, many students would sit through the course even if they were not officially registered – just to hear Suheil’s lectures. I understand that Suheil continues to receive some of the highest student evaluation ratings ever recorded in the Honors Program. Fortunately for the rest of us, Suheil turned his lecture notes for this course into a highly acclaimed book.

Beyond the classroom, the Bahá’í Chair is a vital force on campus. Efforts to promote diversity and cross-cultural understanding, initiatives to further the advancement of women, the promotion of teaching excellence, and numerous other efforts are driven and supported by the Bahá’í Chair.

And, of course, the Bahá’í Chair serves as a national and global influence. Working with a broad cross-section of spiritual organizations, academic institutions, international scholars, and others, the Bahá’í Chair has established a global network for scholarship on peace and conflict resolution. In collaboration with The Temple of Understanding, The International Academy for Human Sciences and Culture, and The Global Dialogue Initiative, the Chair has acted to further the cause of world peace – while bringing international attention to the University. I was especially struck and impressed by the Dialogue between Islam and the West that the Chair initiated in

the wake of the events of September 11th. In fact, the U.S. Government, cognizant of both the need to foster greater understanding and avoid the ugliness of scapegoating and racism, sought out Suheil's advice and input to establish people-to-people contacts and cultural understanding between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds. These efforts have continued in various forms over the months and years since September 11th.

I could easily spend my entire time this evening talking only about the history and contributions of Suheil as the Bahá'í Chair – contributions to the campus, to the nation, and to global understanding. I could just as easily spend the entire evening talking about the personal fondness, respect, and admiration I have for Suheil; the cultural harmony and spirituality he embodies, his openness and humility, his on-going journey as teacher and learner, and the integrity, honesty, and humanity of his Bahá'í faith. During our time together at the University of Maryland, there were many special occasions. Two are particularly memorable. The first is when Madame Rabbani stayed with Patty and me at the President's home. It was such a privilege to be in her company. She had a grace and serenity that cannot be adequately described; it had to be experienced in person. I also shall never forget the visit Suheil, Irv, I, and others made to Haifa to meet with members of the Supreme Council and visit the indescribably beautiful Bahá'í Shrine and World Center. On that occasion, we had the special pleasure of having dinner with Mrs. Rabbani in her exquisite home. The stories she told about her husband, and the pictures and memorabilia that she shared with us were an experience that Irv and I will never forget and always treasure.

What I would like to do with the remainder of my time this evening is take a broader view and speak about why a position like the Bahá'í Chair that focuses on peace, conflict resolution, tolerance, values, and spirituality is so important on college campuses. Universities are, of course, the spawning ground for the next generation

of leaders – in business, academia, politics, and our communities. Today, perhaps more than ever before in history, we are in great need of enlightened leadership. To a large extent, the values and perspectives students develop during their formative years on college campuses will determine the quality, nature and impact of their leadership in later life. It is as important for college graduates to have developed an appreciation for diversity, other cultures, ethics, and a sense of community as it is for them to have specific knowledge in their fields of study. I say this because I believe so deeply that we are in need of a new generation of highly educated leaders who also respect the “value of values.” The values I speak of here are those grounded in humanistic traditions, such as respect for the individual, inclusiveness, integrity, and the common good.

I suspect that many – if not all – of you are as troubled as I by the erosion of such values in our society today. In the world of business, for example, we have seen a string of corporate scandals. Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom are just a few of the corporations where executives were engaged in serious malfeasance. Yet even as those responsible are pursued, apprehended and brought to justice, we see no real contrition, no hint of shame; only regret – regret at getting caught. These executives and corporate leaders operated in an arena where ethics had become an afterthought at best, taking a back seat to how they could benefit personally while they tried to remain in *technical* compliance with “the law.” What value system – beyond sheer greed – drove these CEOs?

Contrast the behavior of these companies with how Johnson & Johnson handled the famous Tylenol crisis in 1982. This crisis arose when seven people in Chicago died from Tylenol tablets that had been laced with Cyanide by someone – not a Johnson & Johnson employee. Uncertain of the extent of the tampering, Johnson & Johnson was immediately faced with a dilemma – pull all Tylenol bottles across America at a cost of over \$100 million or wait to see

if deaths occurred in other areas of the country as well. Some in the company argued for the latter course. Jim Burke the CEO interceded and pointed to the company's credo, which read in part: "We believe that our first responsibility is to the doctors, nurses, hospitals, mothers and all others who use our products." Within minutes, at Jim Burke's direction, the call went out to remove every bottle of Tylenol from stores nationwide. A twenty-five hundred member communication team was pulled together – at very considerable expense – to alert the public, in part through paid television and radio time. Now that's organizational and leadership integrity.

Writing on this incident a few days later, the *Washington Post* said that, "Johnson & Johnson is a company that has demonstrated the integrity to do what is right regardless of the cost." Jim Burke's values included a sense of obligation to a larger purpose than the company's and his personal gain. Our universities have a responsibility to provide a breadth of curriculum and educational experience – such as those developed by the Bahá'í Chair – that make it more likely that we produce future generations of Jim Burkes, *not* Ken Lays.

But business ethics are not the only concern in the America of 2004. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court. This landmark decision brought an end to legal segregation of schools in the United States. It ushered in an era of Civil Rights legislation that promised to finally make the words of our Declaration of Independence real, that there *would* be equity of opportunity for all men and women, that the scourge of discrimination would finally be expunged from the soul of our nation.

Sadly, that is not the reality of life in America today. Our schools are more segregated now than they were in the 1960s. Study after study shows that our society is still rife with discrimination and prejudice. I read the other day that a white felon has a better chance

of getting a job than a minority with equal academic and experience qualifications and no criminal record. I have also seen reports showing that minorities and women with net worth identical to white males are about half as likely to get a loan from a bank. Yes, we would all like to think of America as a place where race, ethnicity, and gender really do *not* matter in decisions about opportunity, compensation, and professional advancement. The sad truth is, however, that they still do matter and in ways that are disproportionately harmful to minorities and women.

A truly equitable American society is something that probably will not exist in any of our lifetimes. But it is an ideal that I believe we all have a responsibility to help our nation move toward. One way we at universities can meet this obligation is to create a new generation of educated citizenry that, on our college campuses, has a chance to experience the value of diversity and to gain an appreciation for the oneness of humanity. These are things done at College Park through programs like those developed and sponsored by the Bahá'í Chair.

But the concern about values in America is not limited to corporate and social issues. In government today, we see strident rhetoric and personal invective take hold over the values of compromise and collaboration. A phrase I have heard on more than one occasion this year strikes me as very telling. I have heard lawmakers say that they are willing to “cooperate” with those on the other side of the aisle, but they rarely use the word “compromise.” At first blush, “cooperate” sounds like a positive term. But brush away the pleasantries of the language, and a far less appealing sentiment comes into focus. What this statement boils down to is a willingness to work with other people, so long as WE work to do things MY way. Politics, which had always been perceived as the “art of compromise” has become prisoner to absolutism, where ethics and values are willfully and stridently misappropriated. Those in opposition to an idea are de-

scribed not simply as wrong, but as “wrongheaded,” not as mistaken, but “misguided,” as if they suffer from a moral failing that prevents them from understanding the inherent virtue of a position. The best interests of our nation, or our state, are increasingly subjugated by the narrow interests of rigid ideology. It is imperative that we move away from this divisive, “point scoring” approach to political leadership and look for avenues that balance the diverse interests of the larger society. The art of dialogue, of finding common ground as promoted by the Bahá’í Chair, is sadly missing in today’s political arena and needs to be restored.

The same phenomenon is at work in international politics. For example, our unwillingness to “stay the course” and find meaningful common ground on the Kyoto environmental protocols is in my view a national disgrace. I was quite taken by New York Times columnist Tom Freidman’s article a few weeks ago. In it, he laments our nation’s failure to exert global leadership on environmental matters. He writes, and I quote, “I want to wake up one morning and read that President Bush has decided to offer a real alternative to the stalled Kyoto Protocol to reduce global warming. I want to wake up and read that General Motors has decided it will no longer make gas-guzzling Hummers and President Bush has decided to replace his limousine with an armor-plated Toyota Prius, a hybrid car that gets over 40 miles to the gallon. I want to wake up and read that Mr. Bush has announced a Manhattan Project to develop renewable energies that will end America’s addiction to crude oil by 2010.” From my perspective, Mr. Freidman is “dead on.” In our dealings with other nations on issues like the environment, we need corporate and political leadership that values the larger “common good” over narrower special interests.

Perhaps more alarming is the Balkanization of geo-political interests in this era of globalization. The racial, ethnic, and religious strife rampant in the world today cries out for leaders who practice

mutual respect and tolerance and reject radicalism and xenophobia, leaders who are skilled in the art of compromise and conflict resolution. In a recent newspaper column on promoting the value of democracy, Henry Kissinger captured this thought well. He said, “The advocates of the important role of a commitment to democracy in American foreign policy have won their intellectual battle. But institutional building requires more than doctrine. It also requires a vision that recognizes cultural and historical circumstance. Such humility is not an abdication of American values; rather, it is the only way to implement these values effectively.” Appreciation of cultural and historical circumstances is a *quality* promoted by the Bahá’í Chair through its programs in international dialogue and conflict resolution – a *quality* which, unfortunately, is in such short supply in today’s diplomacy.

Even higher education has been affected by the excessive focus on personal gain over the broader welfare of the larger society. To explain this point, I digress for just a moment. Over the past half century, higher education and its role in society has undergone a fundamental change in the United States. The emergence of the international marketplace and the reduction of trade barriers make it clear that the U.S. can no longer compete as a production-line manufacturing economy. Gone are the days when a strong back and a sound work ethic all but guaranteed a decent job and a good life. The path to a high quality of life – both for individuals and for our nation – now requires knowledge, innovation, and creativity. Our nation has been successful in making the transformation from an economy built on muscle power to one driven by brainpower and our public higher education institutions have been largely responsible for this success.

Indeed, the cornerstone for building the U.S. knowledge economy has been the expansion of access to higher education. In the first half of the twentieth century, college was considered the private domain

of an elite minority. Since then, with financial aid and greater public support, the doors of higher education have been opened to larger and larger numbers of people. The U.S. was the first nation in the world to “democratize” higher education. In 1960, for example, approximately 45% of all high school graduates continued on to college. Today, the figure is roughly 70%. Even more telling, in 1960, less than 8% of the population of the United States over the age of 25 had completed four or more years of college. Today, that number stands at almost 30%. This transformation – affordable access to high quality public higher education – is the crowning achievement of post-WW II America. It has provided the U.S. economy with the workforce necessary to build the world’s most successful knowledge-driven economy and it has built the largest middle class in the history of the world. All of this has been possible because higher education was seen as a “common good” and, as a result, was the target of substantial public investment so that our nation would have affordable, accessible, high quality higher education.

Now to my point. Tragically, in my view, forces seem to be moving us away from the very approach that has served our nation and higher education so well. There is a demonstrable shift in the public’s view of higher education, away from thinking of it as a “common good” to considering it a “private benefit.” By this I mean, rather than states and the federal government investing in higher education to make college accessible and affordable in recognition of the fact that an educated citizenry benefits the larger society, there is a dramatic shift toward expecting individuals to pay a larger share of the cost.

In Maryland, for example, state support for higher education was reduced by 14% last year, erasing the budget increases of recent years. In real, not constant dollars, we actually stand at the same state-funding level we did five years ago when we served 8,000 fewer students. A decade ago, state support was the largest part of our total budget. Today state support is less than 25% of our budget

and is actually the smallest of our three main funding sources, being surpassed by both tuition revenue and research grants.

Unfortunately, these changes in support of public higher education occur just at the time when higher education faces a sharp surge in enrollment demand as the “baby boom echo” reaches college age. The Census Bureau projects that over the next decade the “college age” population (18 – 24 year olds) will grow by over 14% nationally.

The effects of the baby boom echo will not be evenly distributed across the country, however. In Maryland, for example, we anticipate an even greater increase in high school graduates – almost 25% over the next decade. And this increase will be disproportionately from minorities and the economically disadvantaged.

These two realities – reduced funding and surging enrollment – threaten our colleges and universities, and are in conflict with the overall heightened expectations placed upon our institutions with regard to workforce preparedness and economic impact. But the greatest threat posed by the double whammy of declining public support and rising enrollment demand is to the future well being of our nation. The Department of Education’s Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid reports that in this decade, 2 million college qualified low income high school graduates will not attend college because of financial barriers. Sadly, we are at the point where a low ability, high income student is more likely to go to college than a low income, high ability student.

Imagine living in an America where the ladder of opportunity which higher education represents, is not available to millions of qualified young people from the lower end of the economic spectrum. Imagine living in an America where, because there is an inadequately skilled domestic workforce, industry *must* export high paying jobs or import workers to sustain our knowledge-based economy. The potential social tensions such a situation would create are troubling

to consider. Clearly, we need a new generation of leaders and an educated citizenry that understands how important it is for the future well being of our nation to make quality higher education available to every qualified student.

In each of the cases I've cited – business, government, higher education – what we are witnessing is leadership that devalues and diminishes the “common good.” What the Bahá'í Chair is all about, is the *elevation* of the common good. It seeks this higher ground by focusing not on what divides people, but rather on what *unites* them – what unites *us*. The opportunity that initiatives like the Bahá'í Chair represent are the opportunity to educate a new generation, not just in the academic sense, but also with attention to the development of character, ethics, and values. I hasten to stress that I am in no way advocating any specific set of ethics or values be taught. And most certainly I am not advocating indoctrination. Rather, we must ensure that throughout their higher education journey, our students travel with an open mind while exposed to the widest variety of ethical, spiritual, and philosophical thought. By doing so, we will enable students to think for themselves, to recognize the commonalities that unite the people of the world, and to fully comprehend the “value of values.”

While institutions of higher learning are just one of the avenues through which this is accomplished – along with family, faith, etc. – our obligation to have a role in this area is self-evident. In his recent paper, “The Opening of the Academic Mind” Suheil cited Plato's warning that if we fail to empower our students with the virtue of character, then we are leaving them to wander around like cattle on the chance of picking up virtue by luck.

The inter-faith curriculum of the Bahá'í Chair, which is expansive and inclusive in its spirituality, has provided the University of Maryland an invaluable path toward meeting this most important obligation. More importantly, it offers incredible potential to go even

further. It is my wish that long after Suheil's and my service to the University has ended, the Bahá'í Chair will continue to educate and illuminate people across this campus and around the globe. I can think of no greater legacy than the pursuit of peace, understanding, and the greater good for people everywhere.

In closing, let me say that 32 years ago this spring, I was invited to Israel to give lectures in my specialty of mathematics. My wife Patty and our two children, Bill and Ann E., spent three weeks in Haifa. Because of its incredible beauty, we were drawn to the Bahá'í Center and surrounding gardens. I remember the sense of serenity and peace we felt as we strolled along the paths and visited the golden-domed Shrine. Little did I know that several decades later I would have the privilege of a close association with the people who helped to create that remarkable place. I consider my relationship with the Bahá'ís one of the most important of my life. I thank you for your support and friendship over the years, for the added meaning you have given to my life, and for the singular honor of giving this special lecture.

Biography of Chancellor William E. Kirwan

On August 1, 2002, William English Kirwan became the third chancellor of the University System of Maryland.

A widely respected academic leader, Dr. Kirwan served as president of Ohio State University for four years, and as president of the University of Maryland, College Park for nine years. Prior to his presidency, he was a member of the University of Maryland faculty for thirty-four years.

Dr. Kirwan received his bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Kentucky and his master's and doctoral degrees in mathematics from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in 1962 and 1964. He is a member of several honorary and professional societies, including Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, the American Mathematical Society, and the Mathematical Association of America. A prolific scholar, he is co-editor of the book *Advances in Complex Analysis* and has published many articles on mathematical research.

A national leader in higher education, Dr. Kirwan serves as Chair of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges' Board of Directors and is Chair of the American Council on Education's Board. He is also a member of the Business-Higher Education Forum.

Dr. Kirwan was appointed by President Clinton to serve as a member of the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century and chaired the National Research Council's Commission on the Mathematical Sciences in the Year 2000, which produced the report, *Moving Beyond Myths: Revitalizing Undergraduate Mathematics*, National Academy Press (1991). He was appointed by President Bush to the Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

The recipient of many honors, Dr. Kirwan has been elected to the Hall of Distinguished Alumni at both the University of Kentucky and Rutgers University. He also was selected to receive the Rutgers University award for Career Achievement on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of that university's graduate school. In 2002, he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In addition, Dr. Kirwan received the Maryland Senate's First Citizen of Maryland Award in 1998.

Dr. Kirwan is married to Patricia Harper Kirwan, also a graduate of the University of Kentucky and a classmate since seventh grade. They have two children, both University of Maryland alumni: William E. Kirwan III and Ann Kirwan Horton; and three grandchildren, Daly Elizabeth, Kyle, and Andrew.





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