

# Transformation through Service

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*Speech by Reverend Nichelle Blanco, Shinnyo-en Foundation Board Member, at the 2011 National Service-Learning Conference*

Hello. I'm Nichelle Blanco of Shinnyo-en Foundation. I am also a priest of Shinnyo Buddhism, an international Buddhist community originally established in Japan. Since 2008 I have had the wonderful opportunity of serving as a board member of Shinnyo-en Foundation. We are truly honored to be a sponsor of The Fifth Annual Service-Learning World Forum. I want to begin by

thanking you for everything you're doing to truly make service-learning a transformative event.

I also want to convey a heart-felt thank you for your prayers, generosity and service to help the people of Japan. Just as an earthquake can cause a tsunami, so too do your acts of kindness have a ripple effect. The people of Japan know that your hearts are with them.

I grew up in Santa Barbara, California and attended Catholic grade school and high school. My parents have always been involved in service in various ways. My father still volunteers at the Boys Club he grew up at. After my mother found out she had breast cancer and had to have a mastectomy, she decided to start volunteering at the Breast Cancer Resource Center of Santa Barbara. She went from being a volunteer to helping run a wonderful and vital community resource for women diagnosed with breast cancer. My first experience with service-learning was really in junior high school. My school principal Sr. Georgiana had the students in my class visit a convalescent home. Each student was assigned to one of the residents. A woman named "Birdie" was the resident I was introduced to. She was probably 80 years old and she loved birds. I would check out books from the library about birds, read them aloud, and show her the pictures. Sometimes I was uncomfortable around her because I wasn't always able to understand her. Her speech was impaired due to a stroke and she would grow frustrated with me when I could not understand her. One day I went to see Birdie and found that she was extremely upset. She was eagerly anticipating a visit from one of her children. For some reason the visit had to be cancelled. When I looked into Birdie's room and saw the staff trying to calm her down, I didn't know what to do. I felt unable to offer her anything except companionship. That day all Birdie and I did was sit together for an hour. She just cried as I held her hand and I cried a little too. I was humbled that this person felt she could share such deep emotions with me. I found it so hard to leave Birdie that day. I was unaware of the impact my small act of service would have not only on Birdie, but also myself. It was a truly transformative experience for me.

As many of you know, Shinnyo-en Foundation is dedicated to creating World Peace. We put a lot of our focus on young people. The words Shinnyo-en, in Japanese, mean a borderless garden. And in \_or

through\_ service-learning, we're planting seeds – kind of like a garden, aren't we? Think of young people as seedlings. In a sense, you're watering them, giving them nourishment, guidance, and inspiration, shining a ray of sunlight. You are: Growing the future. And that's why I want to express my Gratitude and to say thank you for the incredible work you do every day. You are truly transforming the world.

In Shinnyo-en our religious and spiritual leader is Her Holiness Shinso Ito. Her Holiness was raised with the ideas of service-learning from the time she was very young. You might say that she was a seed, and her parents, the Founders of the Shinnyo-en Order watered her and spread rays of sunlight to nourish her with ideas like... Embracement. Embracement of others who are different from us is so important. Until we first learn to respect a faith we do not share, a skin color we do not share, a culture we do not share... how is Peace possible? They taught her that Harmony is created by sincere acts of Service, and that an act of Service is an act of Peace. They told her that everything that happens contains a lesson, a teaching. Her parents taught her how to reflect on the everyday experiences of life. To think: What is the lesson? And that's really service-learning, isn't it? They taught her about the power of Kindness. Because Shinnyo-en is a garden without borders, Shinso Ito grew up with the idea that Kindness has no borders. So as a young girl, she was nurtured by her parents – a seedling in a garden without borders – and today she is the leader of over one million Buddhists around the world. Her Holiness Shinso Ito spoke at the Women's Conference in Long Beach in October 2010 in front of 5,000 people, and she finished her talk with the words of her mother Tomoji. She said, "The challenges we face are those we can overcome. NOW IS THE TIME." And that's the theme of this conference, isn't it?

The mission of Shinnyo-en Foundation is to bring forth deeper compassion among humankind, to promote greater harmony, and to nurture future generations toward building more caring communities. The actions of people around us impact us every day. On a global level, what we do on one continent impacts others. At Shinnyo-en Foundation, our initiative Six Billion Paths to Peace is an effort to inspire people to focus on our interconnectedness and reflect upon the individual contributions that each of us is making to create a more harmonious world. We believe that inside each person is an innate goodness, what we call the buddha-nature. And our spiritual practice is to polish this Buddha nature, to polish the soul. We do this primarily by offering Service to others and by practicing Gratitude. But it's not just blind service, its service with reflection and using that to propel you into a life of transformation. It seems to me that is the key to Service Learning. It's Service that's transformative. So the question is: How can we make each act of service a transformative moment?

Sometimes when we think about Service, we focus on the person receiving the gift, because that's what's on the surface and easy to see. But what's also important is the act of Service itself is how it transforms the giver. Service- learning is Service that transforms the giver. Whether your act of Service is building a house, like in Habitat for Humanity, or working with seniors, or caring for the homeless, we tend to see the outer harmony, the outer peace. But what's even more important is the inner peace. One of the most healing forms of service-learning is multi-faith/interfaith events. Interfaith engagement is often by its very nature transformative.

I want to share a story with you about an event hosted by Shinnyo-en each year in Hawaii called Lantern Floating. It began 11 years ago on Memorial Day... when only a few thousand people mainly from our Buddhist denomination throughout the world gathered on the beach to pray for World Peace. Last year, on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, there were 42,000 people gathered on the beach, the vast majority of who were not from Shinnyo-en. It's an ancient Buddhist ceremony. As the sun set in the glow of candlelight thousands of people float prayer lanterns on a river or sea in memory of lost loved ones. But here's the exciting part at the event in Hawaii . Muslim prayers float next to Jewish prayers.... Buddhist prayers float next to Hindu prayers... Sikh prayers float next to Sufi prayers...next to Catholic prayers next to Baptist prayers. Those without a faith tradition... All in one place. All at one time. In a prayer for PEACE! It was life changing! It was perfectly calm and thousands of people from different countries... from different backgrounds were there. There was true harmony. Having seen what's possible, people see the world differently. It becomes a transformative event. One of the most transformative forms of service- learning is what I call "Bridge-building" Service. We can change the world by building bridges.

As I mentioned I participate in interfaith work, especially with young people. Back home in California I work with teens through the Interfaith Youth Council of Orange County. At an event last month over 100 teens from 11 faith traditions gathered at the Shinnyo-en Buddhist temple in Yorba Linda. This year was particularly special because it was the teen leadership group that organized the entire event. They decided on the theme of the event, participated in workshops prior to the event to develop their facilitation skills, they called out to their peers to participate and did so much more. They believe in the importance of interfaith dialog and projects that bring together teens of various backgrounds and faiths as a way of building peace in the world. The MC of the event asked a simple question at the end of the day. He asked the teens, "How many of you feel like you've made a new friend today?" Immediately, all hands went up. The teen leadership group that worked so hard to organize that event did something great through an act of service. They began to build a more peaceful community by working together to break down barriers and build bridges. I believe that service -learning is one of the best ways to nurture the planet. Because it helps you to reflect, it is also transformative. It is a way to polish your innate goodness and make it shine for the benefit of those you serve. Her Holiness Shinso Ito was interviewed in the Buddhist magazine, Tricycle, and she said, "Positive transformation is usually incremental." For example, we won't reach the Millennium Development Goals overnight. But small efforts add up like drops of rain that become a river, and flow into a great ocean. We will change the world with service-learning the way a few raindrops form a river and then an ocean.

At Shinnyo-en Foundation we say there are "Six Billion Paths to Peace." There are Six Billion ways to reach the Millennium Goals. What's the right way? The way you're passionate about! If you feel joy excitement, that aliveness... that's the way!! Follow your heart of joy. If we're going to engage the young people of today, we must make service-learning joyous. We must engage their heart. And through giving, watch them grow and transform. Thank you!