

The Thirty-first Annual Niwano Peace Prize Award Ceremony Address

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I would like to thank all of you here today, including Mr. Masanori Aoyagi, Commissioner of the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, Rev. Tsunekiyo Tanaka, Chairman of the Board, Japanese Association of Religious Organizations, His Excellency Archbishop Joseph Chennoth of the Apostolic Nunciature in Japan for attending this ceremony awarding the thirty-first annual Niwano Peace Prize.

It is a great honor for the Niwano Peace Foundation to present this year's Niwano Peace Prize to Dena Merriam, an American Hindu and the founder and convener of the Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW).

As we just heard in her introduction, Dr. Merriam's activities are quite broad in scope. She has taken on a wide variety of issues, but I see a key word in everything she does, which is "balance."

In 2002, Ms. Merriam founded the GPIW, an international organization of religious and spiritual leaders who are women. Since then, Ms. Merriam's goal has been, in a field that tends to be dominated by men, to tap women's religious and spiritual powers and apply them concretely toward resolving global issues. Simply stated, we must always consider the balance between men and women in global programs, including inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

The major catalyst that led to the establishment of GPIW came in the year 2000, when I recall that Ms. Merriam participated in the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders convened at United

Nations Headquarters in New York. As one of the vice chairpersons of the summit, Ms. Merriam was surprised to find that women religious leaders had such a small place in it. This led to her founding GPIW.

In fact, I also attended that summit, serving as a session coordinator. The other day, I had the opportunity to look at the commemorative photograph taken at that time. Kofi Annan, who was the Secretary-General at that time, is in the center of the photograph, surrounded by some fifty representatives of different religions. Ms. Merriam is at the very far left, while I am on the right side in a back row. Among the religious leaders in that photograph, the women, including Ms. Merriam, are only five in number.

Fourteen years have passed since then. Today, I am deeply moved to see that Ms. Merriam is this year's Niwano Peace Prize recipient.

Generally speaking, society still gives the strong impression that men make the world go round. However, if we really think about things, perhaps this is the wrong idea. Society, community, and the home—the places most important to human life—are supported, from one day to the next, by women. In particular, women play the most decisive, most important role of giving birth and fostering life. Every one of us has a mother. From her we have received tremendous influence that has molded our character as individuals and determined how we conduct ourselves as members of society.

Women possess a wealth of spiritual riches: kindness, warmth, consideration for others, a conciliatory nature, and the ability to share. Such a religious spirit, imbued with the strength of women, is precisely what modern society needs most. It is the starting point for truly fostering humanity and building world peace.

I am incessantly hoping that Ms. Merriam and the women participating in the planning of GPIW's will become an even more powerful force in promoting the importance of this religious spirit.

Ms Merriam is also making great strides to realize religious balance between the West and the East. She is seeking equal distribution of the numbers of participants representing Western and Eastern religious traditions, as well as equal speaking opportunities, at venues such as inter-religious conferences.

Someone once told me, about being religious, "It is not something to insist upon, it is something in which to take refuge." In particular, members of Eastern religious traditions, even those with deep religious convictions, tend not to adopt an attitude of strongly insisting upon their beliefs where outsiders are concerned.

Regarding solutions to contemporary problems, however, Eastern religious traditions have many insights to offer. For instance, the tolerance that recognizes versatility; the spirit of emphasizing the relationships between one human being and another, and between the individual and the whole, rather than merely individualism; acknowledging that because human beings are a part of nature, we must lead lives of coexistence with nature; and reigning in desires that might grow boundlessly large.

Being thoroughly conversant in these Eastern spiritual values, Ms. Merriam is just the person to advocate religious balance between East and West.

Furthermore, she is also concerned about the economic balance between developing and developed nations, and the balance between the natural environment and human economic activity, and has demonstrated preeminent leadership in tackling these issues and making changes for the better.

Finding balance, phrased differently, is finding the way to live together without biases. There is no denying that in today's world, making that balance a reality will bring with it great challenges. I would like to again

express my profound respect and heartfelt praise for Ms. Merriam's steadfast leadership and passionate pursuit of that way forward.

As honorary president of the Niwano Peace Foundation, I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone here.

I believe that all of you know that Kinjiro Niwano, the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Niwano Peace Foundation, passed away on March 9. I would like to once again thank all of you for your kind messages of condolence.

Also, I would like to inform you that Munehiro Niwano has recently taken the place of Kinjiro Niwano as the new Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Niwano Peace Foundation. He will carry forward the mission of this foundation in accordance with the final wishes of the past chairperson and by working together harmoniously with the foundation's staff. Once again, I want to thank you all for your understanding and your cooperation during this time of transition.

I would like to conclude by expressing my hope that today's award ceremony becomes an opportunity for many more people to share in Ms. Merriam's vision and initiatives, and that she will continue hereafter, in good health, in her important activities for peace and reconciliation.

Thank you very much.