

Inner Peace Symposium
Columbia University
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Introduction
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I have only a short time in which to briefly introduce this Inner Peace event. Even so, I'd like to do that in two ways: first as the Director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion of the Earth Institute at Columbia; and second, as a Jewish biologist.

In my first capacity I am pleased to welcome you all to this novel, student initiated event. What is the meaning and the value of inner peace, in a mortal world filled with evil, injustice, and suffering? It is a noble expression of the mission of a good university, to have undergraduates lead faculty and clergy to face such a large and difficult question.

This was also one of the founding questions for the CSSR, and so it is a pleasure as well as an honor to share in this evocation of it here tonight. It occurs to me to say that you should all feel free to send an email to cssr@columbia.edu if you would like to know more about our work.

In my second capacity, I want to suggest that while Inner Peace can be mapped to a Jewish sensibility in many ways, the place I find it most helpful as an idea, is as the state of mind and body that permits the question of what to *do*, to be properly asked.

To answer this question in the face of evil and suffering, requires in Jewish terms that we not first try to understand the evil, but only that we ask ourselves what ought we to do in the face of it; to be able to do that, is my definition of Inner Peace.

In "The Righteous Suffer," a lecture given more than fifty years ago, the great Yeshiva University scholar Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, put the matter in terms of the distinction between a life of fate and a life of destiny. As he said:

"What is an existence of Fate? It is an existence of duress ... a factual existence, simply one line in a chain of mechanical causality, devoid of significance, direction and purpose ..."

...

"What is an existence of Destiny? It is an active existence, when man confronts the environment into which he has been cast with an understanding of his uniqueness and value, freedom and capacity; without compromising his integrity and independence in his struggle with the outside world."

...

"In short, man must solve, not the question of the causal or teleological reason for suffering ... but rather the question of its *curative* role ... by turning fate to destiny and elevating himself from object to subject, from thing to man."

But can a person – man or woman – really make this transition from fate to destiny, or are we trapped in mortality and evil? One of today's biggest challenges to Inner Peace is the notion that we are passive, robotic instruments of our genes.

As a biologist I am happy to let you know – in case you thought that your genes made you who you are, or that your free will was in some way diminished by discoveries of neuroscience and human genetics – that your DNA does not entirely determine your fate, and that it does not in the slightest determine your destiny.

Human DNA is modified by human experience. Even the DNAs of identical twins are remarkably different in adulthood, because different experiences create different chemical modifications of our genes. Experience is inscribed in our DNA as the chemicals making up these genes are modified when they are turned on and off during -for example - development, learning, and aging.

Let me close with a story from the Bible. In Chapter 11 of *Numbers*, the fourth of the five Books of Moses – the Christian Old Testament – Moses and the Israelites are in the desert, the Israelites are complaining of the boredom of having nothing to eat but manna, and Moses has one of his many face-to-face confrontations with God. Moses asks, "How do I feed them all?" The answer comes back as a question.

"Ha Yad Elokim tiksar?/Is the hand of God too short?"

In the Jewish tradition this line has also been read as a declarative sentence, not a question: "The hand of God is too short."

By that reading, we must all make the free-will choice to reach up to God's hand, so to speak, if the covenantal connection is to be maintained.

I cannot think of a better way to introduce the notion of Inner Peace, than to say as a Biologist and a Jew, that I believe it is the case that all human beings have the capacity to know inner peace as the choice and the action of such reaching, by confronting evil, and actively choosing to continue to try to make this world a better place.