



FIRST WORD

By Yevgeny Yevtushenko

• Nations are losing the ability to hear each other's heartbeats. Many international negotiations break down because they are built on mutual accusations instead of on mutual confessions. •

One of the causes for the absence of idealism in our world today is the absence of a new philosophy. We need a new philosophy that will sum up all the tragedies of the twentieth century so that we can avoid another—and this time final—tragedy. This philosophy must develop a new ethics that will unite rather than divide people. Humanity is pregnant with this new philosophy, which is kicking from inside, seeking a way out.

I have no intention of offering recipes for creating ideals. Clever recipe givers inevitably fail—like the television evangelists. Not everyone is able to be a hero, but everyone has the opportunity not to be a scoundrel.

On the other hand, I believe there is nothing higher than the ideal of human brotherhood. Even a family will fall apart if the concept of brotherhood is missing. War between nations is nonbrotherhood. An undeclared war—envy, jealousy, gloating, insincerity, lack of frankness—against someone close to you is nonbrotherhood, too. We must conquer the nonbrotherhood in ourselves, and that will make universal brotherhood possible. Brotherhood, if given a chance, is an ideal that can be held in common by people of the most varying political and religious views.

Idealists are often laughed at. They are considered eccentric, unrealistic, and sometimes even crazy. At the turn of the century the bourgeois in the Russian provincial city of Kaluga used to laugh at the parochial-school teacher Tsiolkovsky, who made blueprints for interplanetary spacecraft. Yet he invented the principle on which our spacecraft are built. If the founder of a new philosophy could become not just international but interplanetary, people would laugh at him, too. Yet we need such a philosophy.

The twentieth century devours ideals. It gave birth to chemical and atomic weapons, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, genocide in Cambodia, terrorism, sex shops, AIDS, and one of the most debilitating drugs—television. Technical progress turned out to be a synonym for spiritual regression. The twentieth century also killed our revolutionary idealists. It murdered Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Che Guevara, John F. Kennedy, Aldo Moro, and Olaf Palme.

To the gigantic number of the starving is constantly added the gigantic number of the spiritually starved. Acknowledged spiritual hunger, however, is not terrible. What is terrible is unacknowledged spiritual hunger, especially when it seems like comfort. Fear of burglary makes people put numerous locks on their doors. But at the same time, they put locks on their souls so that no one can open them and see what's inside. For many the standardization of thought is not a catastrophe but a salvation. Instead of listening to the

world, people plug up their ears with earphones playing music. They jog right past a mugging victim and fail to hear the victim's moans. We are replacing our eyes with peepholes on doors. Many of us living in enormous apartment buildings don't know our neighbors on the same floor and don't want to know them. Then why the hell know our neighbors on the planet?

Instead of being a window on the world, a newspaper in the hand becomes a curtain for blocking out the world. The habit of watching a visual salad of human suffering with a cloying dressing of advertising on the TV news leads to the habit of contemplating those sufferings instead of sharing them.

Think of the time we all spend at parties that are merely counterfeit human contact. Just try responding to "How are you?" seriously. Say that things are not good at home, you're not sleeping nights, you're contemplating the best way to commit suicide, and that you have lost faith in yourself and in everyone else—and the questioner will back away from you, thinking you have lost your mind. He may be having problems at home himself or may be up all night thinking about the same things, yet he can't admit it because he's afraid of appearing weak. Speaking openly of your weaknesses is human strength. Pretending to be strong is a weakness that can turn into a disease.

This fear of personal "confession" then turns into a national fear. At the same time that secret services worldwide are achieving great heights in mutual eavesdropping, nations are losing the saving ability to hear each other's heartbeats. Many international political negotiations break down because they are built on mutual accusations instead of on mutual confessions.

Calling one government the symbol of all bad on the earth, and one's own government the symbol of all good is nothing other than fear of confession. We will achieve a lasting peace on Earth only when political negotiations are built on mutual courage.

The most important thing facing us now is to save the world from nuclear catastrophe. If we do save it, will it be a world without ideals, based only on a biological deal? Estranged from one another, will we have made a cold calculation for our physical survival? Will we replace the ideal of human brotherhood with pragmatic détente, promising only temporariness and undependability? Will we give up and betray the best of humanity? Or will we recognize a world where all religious and political views are accepted?

Yevgeny Yevtushenko is an internationally acclaimed Russian poet. His book *A Most at the End* was recently released by Henry Holt and Company. This piece was translated by Antonina W. Bouls.

A DEFICIT OF IDEALISM

by Yevgeny Yevtushenko

After the death of such giants as Pasternak, Eliot, Frost, Neruda, and Montale, world poetry has become as boring as a zoo without elephants or lions, where all the cages are filled with domestic cats and parrots. As the Oriental saying goes, you can't make a single lion from a thousand cats. When Victor Hugo was asked who was the best poet in France, he replied with a sad chuckle, "Unfortunately, it's Victor Hugo...." Many poets who are considered the best now, could answer the same way, if, of course, they had sufficient honesty. Are the great poets dying out, like the mammoths, and with them the great readers of poetry? If that is the case, why is it happening?

In order to be a real poet and to love poetry, you have to be an idealist at least a little, a Don Quixote at least a bit. A deficit of idealism is the cause of the crisis in poetry and in the interest in poetry. The twentieth century devours ideals. It gave birth to tanks, jets, chemical and atomic weapons, the Holocaust, the Gulag, Hiroshima and My Lai, genocide in Cambodia, terrorism on land and in the air, sex shops, AIDS, LSD, and one of the most debilitating drugs--television. The twentieth century killed so many revolutionary idealists in Russia, in China, killed Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Che Guevarra, John F. Kennedy, Aldo Moro, Palme, so many desaparecidos in Argentina and in other countries. Technical progress turned out to be a synonym for spiritual regression. To the gigantic number of the starving is added constantly the no less gigantic number of the

spiritually starved. But acknowledged spiritual hunger is not terrible. What is terrible is unacknowledged spiritual hunger, when it seems like comfort. Fear of burglary makes people put in secret alarm systems and numerous locks on their doors. But at the same time, they put locks on their souls, so that no one can open them and see what is inside. For many, the standardization of thought is not a catastrophe, but a salvation. Instead of listening to the world, people plug up their ears with earphones playing dubious music and might jog right past a mugging victim and not hear the moans. Instead of being a window on the world a newspaper in the hand becomes a curtain for blocking out the world. The habit of watching a visual salad of human suffering, with a cloying dressing of advertising, on the TV news leads to the habit of contemplating those sufferings instead of sharing them.

Simultaneously with the crisis in art per se, the art of not saying what you think and the art of not thinking are flourishing. The world is filled with people who have locked up themselves. Think of the time we all spend at silly birthday celebrations, dinner parties, and banquets that are merely counterfeit human contact. Just try responding to the meaningless "How are you?" seriously, say that things are not good at home, that you're not sleeping nights, choosing the best way to commit suicide, that you have lost faith in yourself and in everyone else--and the questioner will back away from you, thinking you have lost your mind. Even though he may be having

problems at home himself, may be up all night thinking about the same thing. But he can't admit it, because he is afraid of appearing weak. Yet speaking openly of your weaknesses is human strength while pretending to be strong is a weakness that can turn into a disease.

The deficit of idealism becomes a deficit of confession. A loss of faith in rhetorical, abstract ideals can be beneficial. Even unideal, but living, people are out last concrete ideals. We are replacing our eyes with peepholes on doors. Many of us living in enormous modern buildings don't know our neighbors on the same floor and don't want to. Then why the hell know our neighbors on the planet? The fear of personal confession turns into a national fear. At the same time that secret services are achieving great heights in mutual eavesdropping, nations are losing the saving ability to hear each other's hearts beat. Many international political negotiations break down because they are built on mutual accusations instead of on mutual confessions.

Concern over "loss of face" leads to individuals and governments losing face. Calling one government the symbol of all the sins on the earth and one's own the symbol of all that is good is nothing other than fear of confession. We will achieve a lasting peace on earth only when political negotiations are built on mutual courage to admit one's own mistakes and not on a competition in accusations. The most important thing facing us now is to save the world from nuclear catastrophe. But if we do save it, will it be a world without ideals, based only on a

biological deal? A world like that would resemble a covert form of war. Won't there be any great poetry in this world, any great love? Will we all turn into computers, estranged from one another, having made a cold calculation for our physical survival, realizing that fighting one another is irrational? Will we replace the ideal of human brotherhood with pragmatic "detente," which even linguistically carries the sense of fragility, temporariness, undependability? Yet brotherhood is an ideal that can be held in common by people of the most varying political and religious views. Will we give up and betray the best of humanity, beginning with Christ, who believed in it?

One of the causes for the deficit of idealism is the deficit of a new philosophy. We need a new philosophy that will sum up all the tragedies of the twentieth century, so that we can avoid another--and this time final--tragedy. This philosophy must develop a new ethics that will unite rather than divide people, based on mutual confession on mutual tolerance. The division of the world into three worlds is reality today, but for the future it is unnatural. These three worlds are merely three different attempts to find the future, they are not the future. A fourth, common world is possible, one we cannot picture yet. Perhaps it will be a conglomerate of all the best in the three attempts, perhaps it won't resemble any of them. Humanity is pregnant with the new philosophy, and it is kicking from inside, seeking a way out. It has to be helped out and not pushed back in.

A man with false ideals can be a dangerous animal. But a

man without the ideals of common brotherhood is not-quite-human.

Translated by Antonina W. Bouis

I have no intention in offering recipes for creating ideals. Clever recipe givers inevitably fail--like the televangelists. Not everyone can be a hero. But everyone has the opportunity not to be a scoundrel. That is the minimal ideal.

But I believe that there is nothing higher than the ideal of human brotherhood. Even a family will fall apart if the husband is also not a brother to his wife. The Russian idealist philosopher Fyodorov introduced the concept of nonbrotherhood. War between nations is nonbrotherhood. But an undeclared war against someone close to you--envy, jealousy, gloating, insincerity, lack of frankness--that is nonbrotherhood, too. We must conquer the nonbrotherhood in ourselves, and that will make universal brotherhood possible. Fyodorov, by the way, had foreseen the peaceful use of weapons to seed clouds in time of drought. They laughed at him. Unfortunately, evil minds have learned to use the method to create destructive flooding.

Idealists are often laughed at, they are considered eccentric and unrealistic and sometimes even crazy. At the turn of the century, the bourgeoisie in the Russian provincial city of Kaluga used to laugh at the parochial school teacher Tsiolkovsky, who made blueprints for interplanetary spacecraft. Yet he invented the principle on which our spacecraft are built. If the founder of a new philosophy that could become not just international but interplanetary were to appear now, people ^{would} laugh at him at first. Yet ^{we need} such a philosophy and ethics ^{an -al system} ~~are needed~~ now in case of contact with other civilizations.

translator = Antonina W. Bouis