

From the Alumni

Dear Fulbrighters!

The Ukrainian Fulbright Association was formed in 1999 to capitalize on the knowledge and experience gained by alumni of the Fulbright Academic Exchange program in American universities. The Association, however, has another equally important responsibility: to contribute to the expansion of international academic exchange programs as a particularly enriching form of contemporary intellectual life. Our collective efforts have been geared towards developing an atmosphere in which all alumni of the program consider themselves not only members of the Fulbright community, but also bearers of the ideals of the Fulbright mission. For these reasons, I want to share with you my vision of the Fulbright mission.

At a recent conference in Pereyaslav-Khmelnitsky which focused on the difficulties partnerships between Ukrainian and American universities frequently encountered, an American professor mused that although “mission is a nice word” — it is one that is used altogether too often at such gatherings. He called for a clarification of the meaning of the word “mission” in general and within the parameters of the “Fulbright mission” in particular.

Maybe it would be best to begin by recalling the words of Senator J. William Fulbright, who, in 1949, described his initiative as “a modest program with an immodest aim — the achievement in international affairs of a regime more civilized, rational and humane”. “Education”, he wrote, “is an extremely important factor in international relations” because it fostered greater understanding between Americans and other nations. From the very beginning, the Fulbright program pursued the noble goal of using education to create a new dimension of international communication. The American senator emphasized that “the most important task set before education is to penetrate the barriers of nationalism and ideology (...) and commit the greatest power in the world — the power of reason — to promoting a rational and civilized world order”.

In other words, the central function of a Fulbright Association is to address the problems facing education. The Fulbright Association in Ukraine organizes its conferences (some of which are chronicled in this yearbook) precisely around these issues. In this context the Association transcends restrictions of locality and becomes yet another driving force of new forms of international scholarship.

In considering the word “mission”, many of its various forms come to mind — religious, cultural, ideological, military, peace-keeping, and so on. And in every case, the mission appears to be driven by the aspiration to improve our lives as well as the lives of others — their welfare. History brims with examples of such missions. The word “mission” takes on an especially particular meaning in the context of religious doctrines and socialist ideas. It is almost impossible to imagine Christianity without its extensive and widespread missionary activity. Ukraine’s recent communist past offers another example of how seemingly noble ideas of the Marxist proletarian mission to emancipate the world from exploitation resulted in its own negation. The modern world is also imbued with the idea of fulfilling missions.

However, frequently seemingly positive intentions produce entirely contrary results. The current war in Iraq leads us to reconsider the nature of more broadly defined missions and their place in the contemporary world. The painful lessons of the past and of the present show that no one can forcibly accept happiness as defined from above. Even the most noble of efforts can be sabotaged by coercion, especially when questions about the suitability of the object of the mission are ignored and when the very basis on which the mission is grounded is not articulated.

“Mission” is therefore not only a positive term; it can have dangerous and seductive connotations. It implicitly — if only unintentionally — begs a messiah (even if in the lower case) who guarantees victory. It seems then that “mission” is based in altruistic aspirations to improve



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the state of things — to change them for the better. What a noble and humane purpose! At the same time, this perspective implies the superiority of the missionaries over those considered to be the target of the missions. This is a faulty perception. It is especially harmful in the spheres of cultural and intellectual exchanges because it does not consider the fundamental logic of nature, which suggests that only those immersed in a process are fit to analyze it. Any cultural exchange is effective only when it is based on principles of mutual understanding. Prime among these is the willingness of all participants to better themselves by participating in an open dialogue.

In order for a “mission” to sow the seeds of good and not evil, it is especially important to remember a postmodernist dictum – one cannot recognize one truth that is universally applicable to all others. It certainly is impossible within the context of an interconnected globalized world. An interconnected world implicitly negates the ability of any single individual to articulate exclusively interpreted universal truths. We must take into account that the world in which we live is richly full of diversity that needs to be rightfully respected.

Nevertheless, neither the legitimacy of differences nor the indispensability of unity precludes the articulation of specific “missions” as a modern phenomenon. Conversely, favorable conditions have emerged that allow us to once again to reconsider the word mission in a positive light. These conditions enable an open dialogue to play a central role in preclud-

ing the dominance of one discursive framework over another. In this sense, “mission” conveys an aspiration for betterment based on common understanding.

The Fulbright mission is shaped by this understanding of the word. It envisages the affirmation of the power of reason, not in its dictates, but in establishing its limits. The Fulbright mission is grounded in the belief that when the mind is liberated from the “barriers of nationalism and ideology” it is free to think and reflect outside the numerous constraints implicit in any given society — stereotypes, biases, erroneous misconceptions, and illusions. Immersion into another cultural and intellectual environment, such as the Fulbright Exchange Program makes possible, encourages not only the exchange of experiences, but also promotes growth in the way in which we see the world, as well as an acknowledgment of how thought is shaped by one’s own constraints.

Therefore, the Fulbright mission is not to teach others, but to learn to understand how others think and to do that without prejudice, independently and appropriately. In this way, the meaning of the Fulbright mission emerges as the liberation of one’s own perspective from societal constraints by promoting a dialogue with the Other.

I would like to wish all Fulbrighters success in carrying out their mission, which gives us all the joy of cognition and reveals the diversity and multiplicity in this world and makes each of us more considerate of the Other.



Olha Homilko at the 4th international conference on “Education and the Fate of the Nation. Philosophy of Education: Problems of Preserving and Increasing the Nation’s Intellectual Potential. European Choice of Education Strategy” (Kharkiv, November 16, 2003)