

Global Citizens | Part I

Mark Gerzon



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Tong Shan University,
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“Why do the people in France hate us?” a second year student, one of almost three hundred seated in the large lecture hall, asked me. “They tried to attack the Olympic torch when it was passing through Paris. Is that because they don’t like our country?”

For a split second, I was speechless. I knew the answer to the Chinese student’s question. So, I imagine, do you. The answer was: the French demonstrators were particularly angry

about the Chinese government’s crackdown in Tibet, as well as their violation of human rights.

With the Beijing Olympics only a few months away, however, my Chinese hosts had specifically asked me not to talk about Tibet on this ten-day book tour that they were hosting. They worked for a government-run publishing house that had just translated my most recent book *Leading Through Conflict* into Mandarin, and they did not want to risk their own positions.

For that instant, which seemed like an eternity, I could not decide what to say. Do I violate my host’s request and jeopardize the rest of the trip? Do I assert that their government is at fault? Or do I sidestep the question?

In such moments, the question of global citizenship is not abstract. It is extremely vivid and real—and the stakes can be very high. If you had been the guest lecturer that night, I wonder: what would you have done?

For me, the issue was complex because my first priority was not to speak as an author, or as an American, but as a global citizen. That meant doing what was in the best interests of the whole—not just for my publisher or the Chinese government; not just for myself and my career; but for everyone involved, including the Tibetan and Chinese people.

If I reflexively responded as an American citizen using his ‘freedom of speech’ to castigate the Chinese for their heavy-handed military intervention, I knew how ineffective that would be. It would not open the minds of these students; most of them would simply dismiss me as yet another ‘foreigner’ who hates them. On the other hand, how could I remain silent? How could I give a lecture on leadership and then cowardly evade this issue?

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“Before I answer,” I said, “let me ask you all a question. In the current conflict between China and Tibet, there are two common ways of looking at it. One is that the violent behavior of Tibetan demonstrators is the problem; the other is that Chinese policies are the problem. If you think Chinese government policy is the problem, please raise your hand.”

In the entire auditorium, there was not a single hand in the air. “If you think the Tibetans are the problem, please raise your hand.”

A wave of hands shot into the air until the room was filled with a sea of fingers.

“Thank you,” I said. “Now I want to tell you that a few months ago, at a university in the United States, I asked the same question. In that room, the results were just the opposite. Every single person felt China was responsible for the bad situation; no one felt it was the Tibetans’ fault.”

The students sat in shocked silence. It was incomprehensible to them that their American counterparts could see the Tibet-China conflict so differently.

“Do you think that classes like these where everyone thinks exactly the same will provide the best education?” I asked.

Shouts of ‘no’ echoed around the room.

“Do you think that diverse opinions will make you smarter and make your country safer?”

Loud ‘yes’s’ formed a Chinese-accented chorus.

“To be good global citizens and Chinese citizens,” I quickly added, building on their energy, “please learn to understand all sides of this issue. China is a great country. Your power is rising. So you need to see all sides. When a wall of mistrust exists between China and another country, don’t stop at the wall. You must use your minds, and your hearts, to see beyond it.”

My answer to the student’s question, which included the phrase ‘global citizen,’ in turn raised a series of questions:

- What is a global citizen?
- Are you, in fact, one of them, and am I?
- If we are not ‘global citizens’ yet but want to be, what can we do?
- And why, ultimately, does it matter?

Global Citizenship Matters

The first three of these questions we will address in the following pages. But now let us be clear why becoming global citizens matters. It matters because the quality of our lives, and sometimes life itself, is at stake.

Narrow and exclusive human identities are reaching a dead-end. Old, divisive concepts of national citizenship no longer work. As separate nations, separate tribes and clans, separate faiths and ideologies, we created the problems we now face. When Einstein said

that we human beings cannot solve problems at the same level of awareness that created them, he meant precisely what he said. We have to raise our awareness to a different level.

And what is a better starting place than ‘global citizen?’

What Does Global Citizenship Mean?

Once we recognize that global citizenship matters, many questions immediately arise. After all, what exactly does ‘global citizens’ mean? How are global citizens different from those who identify solely with their state or country? Do they have different skills, abilities or attitudes—and if so, what are they?

Unfortunately, the media hype and academic buzz that surrounds the phrase ‘global citizen’ is often more distracting than helpful. ‘Global citizen’ is not a trendy, ready-to-wear eco-identity. It is not a hip ‘lifestyle’ that we adopt by turning down our thermostats, eating locally grown foods or driving a hybrid. No matter how good our intentions may be, declaring ourselves ‘citizens of the world,’ singing John Lennon’s ballad “Imagine,” and boldly proclaiming that we live in a borderless world is simply not enough.

As anyone knows who has dealt with border conflicts and the countless wars that have resulted from them, we cannot wish away the reality of lines marked with fences, barbed wire, and—all too often—soldiers with guns. We may “dream that one day, in the not-so-distant future, borders between States will simply vanish from our maps and our minds,” says Ambassador Marianne Berez from Hungary, who works with the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor peace in the war-torn Balkans. But until that day comes, Berez wisely concludes, “we have to do our utmost here on Earth to make the lives of its inhabitants not only more free and more open, but also more safe and more secure.”

The challenge facing global citizens is that noble planetary visions of love and oneness often seem utopian in a world of boundaries often bloodied by war. The 21st century has so far been immersed in images of the World Trade Center crumbling in flames, devastating conflicts in the Middle East descending into chaos, and ethnic violence from Kenya and the Congo to Sri Lanka and Kashmir. Tribalism, ethnocentrism, and nationalism have not disappeared, but in many parts of the world are reasserting themselves. Scenes of bloody civil wars have appeared far more often in the media than images of the earthrise from the moon. Despite the burst of giddy ‘global thinking’ that followed the moonwalk, our fear of each other is still intense.

The hard fact is that the images sent back from the many orbiting spacecrafts did not instantly transform human consciousness. Because of the breath-taking photographs, biologists began speaking of the earth as a ‘living organism’ or ‘Gaia,’ physicists of an ‘unfolding co-evolution,’ theologians of a ‘sacred Creation,’ philosophers of an ‘indivisible oneness.’ But the heady thrill behind these phrases eventually passed. Although viewing our spectacular planet in those early days of the ‘space age’ took our breath

away and left us awestruck by the majesty of our planetary home, a few photographs taken by men in spacesuits was ultimately not enough to transform human consciousness.

What is needed now is a practical, results-oriented approach to global citizenship that demonstrates its benefits for all of us. In the path-finding book *Global Mindset*, (Javidan, Steers, Hitt 2007) based on decades of research of almost 200 experts on business and management from around the world, the researchers concluded that “the ability to influence individuals, groups and organizations that are different from you to achieve [shared] goals” is now the pre-eminent challenge facing business. Today productivity is not only limited by the challenges of finding new markets, raw materials, skilled workforce, venture capital or all the customary economic variables. Instead, CEOs around the world are finding that the greatest competitive challenge is ‘integrating across the enterprise.’

“Practically speaking, what does this mean?” I asked Dr. Mansour Javidan, the Iranian-Canadian-American professor who co-led this pioneering study.

“It means,” he replied without hesitation, “that business leaders must now integrate their activities effectively with people who they may never have met, with whom they may not share a native language, and who come from many cultures very different from their own. This integration requires a different kind of mindset than ever before.” Frank Brown, dean of INSEAD, the renowned business school that has campuses in France and Singapore, concurs: “The next generation of business leaders must be able to seamlessly operate across cultures.”

Unfortunately, the creative work of making global citizenship relevant, useful and inspiring is not happening quickly enough. Manifestos that challenge us to ‘think global, act locally’ or to ‘Love Your Mother’ (i.e. mother earth) remain caught in an idealistic cul de sac. Instead of transforming the world, so-called global citizens are often simply making themselves feel good. On the one hand, global citizenship is a noble vision and an idealistic goal; but on the other hand, it needs to be strong and grounded enough to make a tangible difference in our troubled world.

For example, please read below the Women’s Environment and Development Organization ‘pledge of allegiance’ to the Earth.

“I pledge allegiance to the Earth, and to the flora, fauna and human life that it supports. One planet, indivisible, with safe air, water and souls, economic justice equal rights and peace for all.”

Does this inspire you? Or does it strike you as impractical, naive and utopian?

Whether you respond positively or negatively, we can all agree that such noble vows of terrestrial loyalty are clearly not enough. Just scan the more than one million entries under ‘global citizen-



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ship' on the worldwide web: you will find reactions ranging from the most enthusiastically positive ("We must all become global citizens!") to the most rabidly negative ("Global citizenship is a dangerous step toward totalitarian world government.") Beautiful songs and noble words, like the dazzling photographs of the 'big blue ball,' have not magically transformed human consciousness. The seamless, interconnected world that brought the astronauts to tears is the same world in which Israelis and Palestinians fight over a small hill in Gaza, in which Tamils and Sinhalese massacre each other in a struggle for their small island of Sri Lanka, in which scores of countries with widespread hunger spend lavishly on weapons, and in which rich countries erect higher walls and tighten security to keep out poor immigrants.

If 'global citizenship' is ever going to be strong enough to deal with these challenges, it must become more robust and vibrant. It can no longer be a pompous self-congratulation ("Since all of us here today are global citizens..." began a speaker at a sophisticated international conference I attended recently). It can no longer be an educational cliché ("We are developing a curriculum to ensure that every one of our students becomes a responsible global citizen," one elementary school principal told me). It can no longer be a corporate mantra for pumping up global sales figures ("When we promote executives to the senior level nowadays," said one CEO of a high-technology company, "we look for experienced global citizens." And finally, the phrase cannot be left in linguistic limbo without any clear meaning. In all 450 pages of *Global Issues for Global Citizens* (Bhargava 2006), the boldly titled volume recently published by the World Bank, one question is never asked: "what exactly is a 'global citizen?'"

One reason why 'global citizen' is a confusing phrase is that even national definitions of citizenship vary tremendously. All 'British citizens' do not define themselves in exactly the same way. Every person who carries an American passport does not share the same image of being a 'US citizen.' And certainly all 'citizens of the European Union' do not share the same feelings about being part of this 27-nation experiment. So if the meaning of national and regional citizenship varies, the various meanings of global citizenship will naturally be even more diverse—and potentially divisive. Nevertheless, people around the world seem to know what a global citizen is not. A 2008 World Public Opinion Poll asked a global sample of 20,000 people which leader on the world stage

inspired their confidence. Not a single national leader at that time—not the USA's George Bush, not China's Hu Jintao, not Russia's Vladimir Putin—gained widespread support (WorldPublicOpinion.org). Conversely, polls over the years have shown Nelson Mandela to have wide respect. So people know the difference between leaders who are able to address global concerns, not just national priorities.

This challenge of developing our global awareness is today not only a high priority for global statesmen, but for all of us in the global economy. In less than a generation, the number of business people working across geographic borders has skyrocketed. Around the world, in virtually every country, a significant and rapidly growing percentage of jobs depend directly on the global economy.

Clearly, a powerful consensus is growing—in business and civic affairs, in education and throughout the professions—that 'global citizens' are needed. But we are only beginning to understand who these citizens are. What exactly does it mean to be a 'global citizen?' What skills or capacities do we need? And how, over a lifetime, do we develop the 'global intelligence' that makes such citizenship a living reality?

We Were Global Citizens Before We Were Born

The truth is: we were already global citizens before we were born. It began with our own DNA. The genes that provide the blueprint for our bodies are more than 99% identical to the genes of all other humans. Genomic research has now established exactly who our ancestors are and where they came from. Our genes are, in fact, an evolutionary 'Global Positioning System' because they establish with uncanny accuracy our family tree going all the way back to the beginning of *Homo sapiens*.

For further proof that the seed of global citizenship is actually within us, all we have to do is think of our ancestors and our current family relations. If we reflect on the origins of the people to whom we are connected by blood, did they spend their lives in the culture in which we now live, or did they come from somewhere else? Did they make challenging, sometimes dangerous, voyages from distant lands? Did they fight in world wars in which they spent years outside their own country? Did they join migrations (sometimes called 'diasporas') in which they moved far from their place of birth to far-away lands? If our parents or grandparents left their ancestral homes, as mine did, what was happening in their country of origin that made them emigrate? What led them to the country that we now call 'home?'

Just as the past is evidence of our global identity, so is our present environment. As we think for a moment about our home, for example, is it made from local materials? If not, where do they come from? If we look at our belongings, reading the fine print on the labels on our clothing or our appliances, what is their country of origin? Where were our cell phones, computers or other electronic equipment manufactured? And what about the food we eat? From

where do the 'ordinary' items like coffee, tea, sugar and salt come? Finally, if we need any more evidence, let us take a closer look at the car or bus that provides us with transportation. Where do the vehicle parts come from, and where were they assembled?

Just like our home and possessions have a global dimension, so do our career, work and finances. Where do our current (or future) co-workers come from? Where are our suppliers, our customers—and, of course, our competitors? Are the forces that affect our work life strictly local, or are we dealing with factors that are international? And what determines the value of the money in our pockets? Is it determined only by our own national economy or by wider forces, including the rising power of other nations?

Even our civic life is increasingly global. In almost every part of the world, our neighbours and the children in our local schools no longer share the same language and culture. In politics, the issues that political leaders are debating are not only national, but increasingly international. The political and civic debate that swirls around us deals with questions that reach far beyond the borders of our own home country.

These outer dimensions of our lives—home, family, work and politics—all underscore the powerful global reality in which we live. But it is still only the external dimension. Even our inner lives, our most personal spiritual or religious beliefs, are global. Whether you are a Christian or Muslim, Hindu or Jew, Buddhist or secular, it is very unlikely that the founders of your faith, or your philosophy, come from your own neighbourhood or city. Chances are that the people who gave birth to your faith tradition (or your more secular worldview) lived somewhere far away. Today, they might need a passport and a visa even to visit you or your place of worship.

Whether we look at our bodies or our families, our places of work or of worship, our personal experience underscores the fundamental fact that we are not only local and national. We are global. This is not an opinion or a political point of view; it is biological, social, economic and religious fact.

Barafu Campsite, Mt. Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. July 2006

Having reached an altitude of 15,000 feet, we were ready for the summit. Huddled in our blue mess tent with our group, my Kenyan colleague Kimani Njogu and I surveyed the tired but committed trekkers in Outward Bound International's first 'Global Leaders Program.' We were both amazed that all of them—four Muslims from different nations, four Americans, and half a dozen more from other countries around the world—had reached this altitude.

After trekking for three days, with the challenging summit awaiting us tomorrow, Kimani and I asked each person after dinner to share what made this global expedition different from a one-nation or single-culture trek.

"My awareness has been heightened," said one. "I can't operate on automatic this time. I have to let go of all my assumptions."

"Here I can discover what people from Afghanistan think of Americans," said an emerging leader from one of the new democracies in Eastern Europe. "How two countries feel about each

other is brought down to the level of two people on a mountain. I am challenged in this setting to be more deliberate and intentional because I am not surrounded by citizens of just one nation."

"I never knew a Muslim before today," said another one of the Americans. "I have learned a lot about their worldview now, and I know what I need to do to understand it even more."

"What makes this different from the UN is that here we can't write anybody off," said another. "We know that we need each other."

"None of us has a single identity—each of us has a multiplicity of them," said one of the participants from the Middle East. "Becoming aware of that gives us more ways to connect to each other."

"My life started on an island," said the young politician from the Philippines. "Then it embraced a whole archipelago; then international work. When I look at my climbing partners, I don't think of the countries they come from; I think of them as someone who was there when I needed them the most. We are three days away from any health care facility. My life depends on you!"

"I am noticing that no one is saying that this is about reaching the summit of Kilimanjaro," said one of the Outward Bound guides. "Everyone here is focused on other people. The way I would put it is: 'You will remember the mountain; but you will remember each other more.'"

"Is there some way," said one of the Muslim men, with tears in his eyes, "that we can bring the whole world into our small blue tent?"

To understand what it means to be a 'global citizen,' we must also focus on the second word, not just the first. 'Citizens' are people who have a voice in the selection of their leaders, are free to speak without fear of being killed or imprisoned, and have access to the information and education necessary to take part in civic life. However, in repressive societies such as Myanmar and North Korea, this kind of 'citizenship' is a dream, not a reality. In authoritarian, non-democratic societies, 'citizenship' does not yet exist. If raising our voice results in our being imprisoned, tortured or killed, then we are not yet free citizens.

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