

**YOUR WORK IS YOUR MESSAGE**

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I want to tell you about some of my early experiences in journalism which have shaped the things I shall be saying today. As a well brought up British colonial, I was sent to Fleet Street, the Mecca of journalism, for what was called "training". Then, I spent a short time being trained at "The London Times" where I learned absolutely no journalism at all, but I did learn how to become a British gentleman. Then I spent two years on Lord Bealbrooks' very sensational "Daily Express" group of papers where I learned all my journalism and promptly forgot how to be a British gentleman. As I went back home and began to edit our newspapers in Sri Lanka, as a good well-trained, Fleet Street journalist, I saw my world in those Fleet Street terms. Those were the early days of my journalism career. I made many mistakes because I was not writing about the way our people thought and felt. I was disrelated from the reality of our people and finally began to realize it.

I asked a man on my staff who had been a villager, and who remained a villager, to tell me any time he thought that I was going wrong in whatever I was writing. He had the right to come to the editor's-office and pick me off. He was a brave man and took advantage of this. I remember two or three occasions when he came to my office and revealed how we can become separated from our own people. I once used the cliché, "You don't kick a guy when he's down." This man came to my office and said, "Mr. Vittachi, what does this mean?" So, I explained. He said, "You don't kick a man when he is down? When better? What are you talking about?" Another time he came to me about another cliché. "Oh yes," I had said, "it is bad to talk ill of people behind their backs." He said, "But, Mr. Vittachi, you can't speak ill to their faces!" I began to see how extraordinarily different from the people I had become as a good British colonial public school journalist. It took me a long time to begin to understand that I had lost touch. This is really the burden of what I call the development process.

The line, "and people are ready now to create a new way," from the song you were just singing caught my attention. This is what I think. But, I am also a great professional disbeliever. I ask myself all the time, "Are people ready to create a new way?" I know that every time you open a door to the future, there are 20 guardians of the past waiting. All of us here in this room are engaged in the business of changing the past. There is nothing more protected than our past, and we should remember this. In creating a new way it is essential to realize that you and I cannot do this alone. Whatever we do is finally very marginal. Whatever the United Nations does is even miniscule in relation to the needs. In fact, it is so miniscule that you'd be alarmed at the figures. Except in very rare instances, no more than three to five percent of resources put into any particular project in the developing world comes from outside that country. For instance, in China, Mao spent something like \$660,000,000 a year on their population problems. The total amount of foreign assistance of any kind (multi-lateral, bi-lateral, every imaginal form of foreign assistance) that comes in is no more than eight million dollars against 660 million dollars. We must understand that there is much less to this great mythology about aid than meets the eye. The country has backed itself; it has put no less amount of energy into these projects from its few resources than we have put in from the outside. Precisely because this foreign assistance is marginal, I insist that wherever I work in the United Nations that the assistance must be more than marginally effective. It must be used as a spur to development. In other words, it must be used in the most sensitive areas of development where it can have a multiplying effect.

Helping people to train themselves in every imaginable way is the best form of development I know. People can develop themselves, we cannot develop other people. This can be seen in our own families. I think it is important to begin the process of identifying the most sensitive areas where essential preconditions exist. One task is to discern how we must all learn. I say this to my colleagues in the United Nations, and I say the same thing to you because you are involved in the same kind of process as the United Nations agencies. We all have to be watchful for what happens to bureaucracies. A bureaucracy becomes its own purpose and you have to work, if you want to work well, in spite of the system.

The first priority is to remove from our minds the stereotypes that have been lodged in our heads. You may imagine that because you have worked in the field for a few years that you have lost these stereotypes forever, but I ask you to look again. It is very difficult to lose the stereotypes, to change the lenses that have been preset in our minds since early infancy through training in school, and through the influence of the media. The extraordinary influence of the media, particularly in countries like this where everybody is exposed to the media,

and the values of the media have become second nature. Now, let me quote something that is deeply etched in my mind. You remember there was a man called Henry M. Stanley, a great American reporter who went to, what was at that time called Niassa Land, and I presume found Dr. Livingston. He returned to England and was welcomed there as a great hero and a great explorer. He was invited to talk to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. In this speech he said, "There beyond the gateways of Africa are 15 million naked blacks waiting for the textile mills of Lancaster to clothe their nakedness. The iron foundries of Birmingham are producing the red metal which will be made into the trinkets that shall adorn those dusky bosoms. Millions and millions of poor benighted heathens are waiting for the Christian message to enfold them." That was 100 years ago when the empire was at its zenith, when the mental ambience of the West was imperial. I can understand such a viewpoint prevailing at that time. Every time I read this line, goose pimples stand out on my arms, but that was the mood at that time. Maybe I can even forgive Mr. Stanley for saying such a thing, especially to that audience. But if I find that same zoological view of people still pervading today, then I protest. I protest very much and I try to do everything in my writing to subvert that view.

Let us look at some issues and the stereotypes attached to them through some specific situations. I was at one time working in the United Nations Population Fund and came across some very interesting insights. At the same time I was writing for the "London Economist" and they asked me to do a series on rural poverty in Asia. At that time I had and still have a little house in a village near Jakarta. I used to use it as my hideout. I was there one afternoon working on a story. I looked across the fence to the Tali farmer next door. He was talking with his wife and his seven children were very happily playing around the house. I started talking to them about how they were able to manage on a very low income. It was the mother who was answering the questions. She was the worker, the hard-nosed one, the manager of the family. The father, my friend, was just like me. He knew all the theory, but his wife was doing the practice.

As I was talking to them a car came down the lane. It was a scarlet Mercedes Benz, a very expensive car. The car stopped outside his house and out came an Indonesian ibu, a lady from town, brilliantly bejeweled and wearing a marvelous sarong kabaya. I tried to merge with the surroundings as she introduced herself as the representative of the Jakarta Family Planning Association. She explained that she had come to tell them that since they had seven children they should stop having any more. The mother asked, "Why not?" The woman from town got a look of despair on her face and said, "Because you'll become poorer." The farmer began to giggle. Since Indonesians are very polite, the lady noticed this guy smiling and asked, "What are you laughing at? This is not a laughing matter." The man said, "Forgive me, madam. I wasn't trying to insult you. I was just thinking that it is not possible." She said, "I can tell you how to stop having more children." He said, "Oh no, not that ma'am. It is impossible to become any poorer." The woman was helpless now, because she had really been out debated. She looked around and saw me. I look like an Indian and it is another stereotype that all the Indians are educated. She turned to me for "educated sympathy." But, of course, my heart was entirely on their side, because I had just learned a tremendous lesson. Here were people who belonged to an agricultural tradition which was at least 10,000 years old. In an agricultural tradition the highest value must be fertility. That is why the idiom of our religions is even agricultural. The imagery and the major values are agrarian. For instance, the shepherd, the flock, the fisherman are images commonly used. Even in Buddhist literature the imagery is agrarian. The architectural idiom of our religions is also agrarian. The tombs, the minarets and the spires all have to do with fertility. People have been imbued for 10,000 years with this metaphor, in these values. The current circumstances are the same as 8,000 years ago. Even so, rural, feudal, agrarian peasants were being asked overnight to change their values. How does one possibly do that?

I want to tell you another story which takes place in Singapore during the days when Lee Kwan Yew had just been kicked out of the Greater Malaysia coalition. Singapore was now a free and independent country. I went to see this man whom I had known in his early days, long before he was prime minister. When I visited him he said, "Look, Mr. Vittachi I have this little island which is 224 square miles at high tide and 226 square miles at low tide. This is an independent nation with very few resources. There are two million people living here, 70 percent of whom are Chinese. What can I find for them to do without any resources?" Over the next few years I watched him at work answering this question and he did a fantastic job. He took a leaf out of the books of the Pharaohs of Egypt. He built pyramids to give people employment -- pyramids that were high-rise apartment blocks. They were built at such a pace and with such efficiency that he could quite rightly claim that a new apartment was ready every 45 minutes. Construction went on 24 hours a day.

I was living in Singapore at that time in a nice little house tucked away in the bush. One Sunday morning while I was reading the newspapers a couple came up the driveway. From their physiognomy and their dress I realized they were Ceylonese, Sri Lankans. They came in and introduced themselves as my long lost relatives. I hadn't even known they existed. After a cup of tea they said they had come to ask me for some help. Jumping to the wrong conclusion, I took out my wallet. He said, "No, no, we have enough money. We did not come to ask for money." I realized I had been operating out of another stereotype that I carry around in my head. They continued, "We came to ask for advice." "What kind of advice," I inquired. They said, "How do we stop? We have four children. How do we stop having any more?" I said, "Why are you asking me, I'm a journalist?" "You are the most educated one we know in our family." That I understood, because even in our villages if you receive a telegram saying your mother is dead, you take it to the educated one (the postmaster, the schoolmaster) to have it read. I understood those things.

So, I said, "Why don't you want to have any more children?" They said they had been living in a little hut in a shantytown near the airport when the city had torn it down. They were moved to this "cave in these pyramids." Now they had an apartment and they had a problem. Their lives had not really changed, except for the fact that now they had a problem. They had one toilet in the house. Papa had to be at work at 8:00 in the morning, and three of the four kids had to be at school at 8:00 in the morning. This meant that there was a line outside the toilet starting at 7:00 in the morning. They have reached the "toilet threshold" of economic development and this was their problem. They now had a motivation to stop having any more children, because their economic living conditions had changed. Nobody, not even this Indonesian ibu, has to come and preach to them about family planning. They have found a reason for it themselves. This story demonstrates what people are beginning to realize the population problem will not be solved in the uterus but in the human mind. These are the kind of insights I'm talking about.

Let's take another arena to illuminate how stereotypes still prevail -appropriate technology. Fantastic phrases like this are perhaps what the international development community produces best slogans like appropriate technology, primary health care. If these were convertible into currency, it would be fantastic. I have done some writing on appropriate technology in which I included this story. I went home recently to Sri Lanka and drove a little UNICEF car there. The usual stereotype is that I'm supposed to be given the big UNICEF car-- a Humber or a Rolls Royce. The car I took was a little cream-colored Datsun. Off I went to the villages with no driver, just myself. As I was passing through a village I saw a crowd of people. As I'm a journalist, I can't resist a crowd. I stopped the car to find out what the rumpus was about. I saw an incredible contraption which had black on it. It was called "New Model Bullock Cart", produced by the Industrial Development Board of Sri Lanka with Norwegian aid. The price was 6,000 rupees. The villagers were crowding around looking at this fancy object. The roof was like that of a covered wagon with a plastic coating to protect the thatch from the monsoons. It may even have had plastic thatch, I'm not sure. It had a long yoke, rubberized wheels, and an enormous undercarriage o' truck springs. All this was to relieve the bull from the weight of the cart falling on its neck. I asked the man next to me if anyone in the village had bought one of these. In the direct fashion of the Sri Lankans he said, "You must be mad." I said, "Why do you say that I am mad?" He said, "Do you think if I had 6,000 rupees I'd spend it on a bullock cart?" I said, "If I gave you 6,000 rupees would you buy this?" He said, "If you gave me 6,000 rupees I'd try to borrow another 6,000 and make you an offer for your car."

Here I am thinking that this bullock cart is "appropriate technology", this device from the industrial development world of Sri Lanka. My colleagues, my compatriots had devised this gadget with money from abroad. Without ever asking the villagers what was appropriate for them. Nobody had asked them what would be appropriate. This man asked me, "Do you think if I had 6,000 rupees, I'd buy a bullock cart?" This illustrates for me that those who have lived for generations in a bullock cart ambience are desperately trying to get out of that bullock cart ambience. This man wants to get out of that ambience and we are trying to keep him there. This appropriate technology was standing between him and his legitimate aspirations, which was my little car. If that car was appropriate technology for me, why wasn't it appropriate for him? This is the kind of stereotype I urge you to consider when you are planning the International Exposition of Rural Development, because this is typical of the top-down messages.

This brings me to the second important thing I want to talk about -- the vertical message. The messages that we've known have always been vertical. They have been spread vertically. All ideas, in fact, that have been produced have seeped down. I have never known an idea that seeped up except marijuana. All ideas seep downwards. We have come through a long vertical period of human history. Even the message of Christ did not

become a message that spread through the masses until Emperor Constantine became a Christian 300 years later. Even Mohammed belonged to the richest family in Mecca until he rebelled against it. Times have changed. The whole human order has changed in magnitude, in character in quality and in need. It will no longer work to try to spread any message from the top down. I remember a meeting of the United Nations Directors of Information to which I had been invited. These men meet every year in some very expensive hotel to have a chat. After this last meeting I refused to attend any more. They were all talking about how to get their messages into the village. I was gawking at the nonsense that was going on around me and was silent for two days. Eventually they said, "Aren't you going to say something?" I said "Sure, you have been talking about trying to get the message into the village the health message, the education message from UNESCO, the children's message from UNICEF, and others but have you ever asked yourselves, if there might be a message from the village that you might consider important to listen to before you do the great planning that you are doing? I am not just talking. I have just sent two journalists out in the field to bring the messages from the village back to me. I want to know what people in the village think about population, development and other issues.

I recommend that you read the book *A Message from the Village*, written by a marvelous woman journalist who had a tremendous experience in North Africa working for Time Life. She went out to 150 villages in 10 developing countries and brought back this book. It's available at the United Nations Population Fund in New York. The demand was so high for it, they have just reprinted it. People are at last beginning to listen to some messages from the villages. But, you are communicators, people whose work itself is your message. Your work communicates better than anything you say to people. It is the only message that really works. We say that we are now out to replace top-down messages with bottom-up. But again this is vertical. It doesn't work like that. The only messages that work are messages spread horizontally from village to village. They work because they are real.

Another slogan in development circles is "technical cooperation among developing countries." But the only way for technical cooperation to work is cooperation within developing communities. If something works in this village, you don't need a newspaper to spread it to the next village. It spreads because it works. This is even true of the family planning message even in the villages of Sri Lanka. When people begin to realize that the two-and-a-half acres of land they have been given is insufficient to maintain a family of more than two or three that message gets across. So much so that there are lines now in the villages of Sri Lanka of men asking for vasectomies, which is a very great social change. Those messages spread laterally. The real tests of our work is whether it is spreading laterally. It is a great test of the efficacy of your own work.

Recently I went to Sri Lanka where our office was trying to get messages into the villages. I said, "Forget it, just drop it." I brought in Mr. Aria and asked him what he needed. He said, "If you could equip me with a video unit, our associates will carry these messages." I gave it to him immediately and within a few months the message was spreading. Many kinds of messages were spreading from village to village to village. It was not working because Mr. Aria was carrying it out, but because he was working laterally. Another example is that we would like to put video into our villages. Usually this means that some guy comes from town and shows a video film and goes back. Or, there's a truck carrying video equipment that goes from village to village. This is the same old nonsense. It keeps happening because we don't trust the village people with any equipment. It is really a cheap camera (cheap in terms of expenditure that people undertake) worth two or three hundred dollars, and we don't trust the village with two or three hundred dollars worth of camera. We think that gadgets are only for us. If you spent five minutes with them teaching them how to handle it, like you would do with anybody, they could work it. You have to teach me how to handle a videotape the same way. After learning how to use it, people in the village will look after it like it was gold and see that it is used in the next village.

These are some of the things that might enrich and make our work more real. We need to drop the stereotypes. We need to remember that our work itself is the message that we are out to spread and that this message should be spread horizontally or laterally. Lateral communication is, indeed, the only real form of development communication.

Let me say something to wind up that I truly believe, or at least, as a disbeliever, I am inclined to believe. Statisticians use what they call the sigmoid curve, the "S" curve. It looks like a segment of a wave. I use it often as a thinking tool in order to explain the tremendous traumas that we and the whole world are going through. This is the change that you talk about in your songs. The globe is passing through the point of inflection on that curve, where it is bending over. We have come through the lower half of the curve and are spreading out across the point of inflection. The interesting thing is that the two curves are different. One bends one way, and one bends the other

way. They are not opposite, but they are apposite. They are going in a different direction. Using this metaphor, we have come through the first part of this curve.

Let me make a bold statement. For instance, the new international economic order is now going to happen. Everybody resists it. Even the people who can bring it about are resisting it. But, I believe that it is not only necessary, but that it is inevitable because we have come through the first part of the curve. For 10,000 years we were passing through the first part of that curve when there were smaller populations and the earth's resources seemed inexhaustible. We trotted into a marvelous syndrome -- a marvelous culture of production and consumption. We consumed the earth's resources because they were inexhaustible. But now we come to the point of inflection on the curve where we have begun to realize that many resources are not inexhaustible, in fact they are rapidly being depleted. Many resources including gasoline, will not last for more than 20 or 30 years at best. What is happening now? After this period of expansion in production and consumption, in exploitation of the earth's resources, we have reached a point of contraction where everything is becoming rationed. American people, particularly, don't like the word ration, because it is against individual liberties. But, they are already being rationed. Small cars are nothing but rationing. Americans have rationed the size of their cars over the last five years. High gasoline prices are nothing but rationing. You can see a different order of priorities in the use of our resources coming into being which is, a new economic order. This has to come about globally if we are going to survive at all.

This same principle is true in other arenas. In the story I told about population, 10,000 years of an agrarian economy is the first part of the curve. Now we are on the point of inflection where there are new values. The values are changing from fertility to regulated fertility or actual infertility. Like all great movements of history, you'll find extreme signs of the change taking place, such as the increased blurring of the sexes or the spread of unproductive human unions. All that will happen, but it is no problem when it is seen as the way the world is going. That is the way I prevent myself from going mad. I try to set something in a historical process so I can understand what is happening today. I offer this process to you as a free gift and say thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to talk.