

Title Slide 1 - Heroes of the Heart

Preamble:

Dignitaries of the College, Faculty, Students and dear friends. I would like to thank and commend the dynamism of Fr. Ranjit George, Director and Dr. Nat for creating a multiversity and especially this initiative of Heroes of the Heart. Thank you for having me here.

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I would like to begin by making a very bold statement. And the statement is this. We are living fake lives in a fake world. We are fakes. Let me very briefly explain why I am saying this.

Let us look at the way we evaluate the economy. GDP does not take into account the cost of the destruction of the environment nor its replenishment cost. And therefore, it is a fake metric. The education we imbibe is fake. Education has become the tail which is being wagged by industry. Education has forgotten its key role in facilitating students to recognise the truth, beauty and goodness of life. Our relationships are fake. They have become more contractual rather than covenant driven. Covenant driven means trust driven. There is no commitment and trust but only the pursuit of short- term thrills. Our work is fake. We choose our careers on the basis of the highest salary offered rather than on our true calling; our inner purpose. Our governance is fake. Politicians make promises for effect

but not for implementation. Our products are fake. We build myths around them and make them larger than life. As the founder of the cosmetics company Revlon who manufacture Revlon stated, “In the factory we make cosmetics, in the store we sell hope.” Coca Cola becomes the ‘Real thing’ instead of being just sugared coloured soda water. Our practice of religion is fake. We place more emphasis on ritual rather than the inner experience. The sign becomes more important than the signified. The finger pointing to the moon becomes more important than the path to the moon. And finally, our news too is fake. That’s not surprising when we live in a fake world. We have made ourselves vulnerable to being manipulated because we can no longer recognise the real truth and therefore are being conned again and again not only by news but in all major areas of life.

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And therefore when I see a program like this which is honouring ‘Heroes of the Heart’ I feel humbled because here I see true human persons who are not fake but authentic. Persons who recognise that all of us are interconnected and interrelated and interdependent. And therefore when a person is in need one automatically reaches out without counting the cost. It is like what we unconsciously experience in our bodies. When any part of the body is injured the entire body rushes to the spot to heal the wound or compensate for the loss. Similarly Heroes of the Heart are persons who are committed to not seeing any other person suffering

alone. Nobody should be in need. We are all one body. When one suffers the whole body suffers.

The Heroes who will be awarded today reflect just that. The inner drive to reach out to others no matter what their situation. Nobody should be in need. That is what propels them inspite of their own physical and economic situation. And so we find these winners reaching out to the deprived and the disadvantaged; whether they be hungry school children or disabled children or vulnerable elderly people or the bedridden, or fighting for justice through the means available to us, or looking after the needs of the physically challenged, the spine injured or the abandoned babies and children. I salute you all. You very truly make me feel small through your greatness.

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What you have done represents the heart of compassion. As Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk said, 'Compassion is a mind that removes the suffering that is present in the other'. So 'compassion' means 'to endure something with another person' put ourselves in somebody else's shoes, and feel her pain as though it were our own. Today we have lost the capacity to be compassionate. We are so intent in leading our fake and selfish lives we have no time for the other. We have inoculated ourselves against the pain we see around us. It no longer affects us. We have inured ourselves. We have become hardened.

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In fact life has become hardened. We see this happening around the world where governments are becoming hard, fascist and dictatorial. Where the rise of technology has led to the emphasis on hard quantitative science skills rather than the soft skills of a human person. That is why we are more and more surrendering our humanity to machines which is creating a still harder world. We also see this happening in hard cement replacing the soft earth as we go on devouring nature and replacing it with buildings and factories and human made capital. We see this in our gaze becoming hardened as we try to see how we can exploit people for our own benefit and as anger and hatred start replacing compassion and love. We see this in the hardening of our relationships where at the least obstacle we clam up and not allow ourselves to grow through our hurt and suffering resulting in divorces taking place and an increase in violence through domestic abuse. We want to be strong. We do not want to be vulnerable. We have lost our civility. We have lost our sense of dignity. We have lost our feeling of community. We have lost our simplicity. We have lost our connection with our roots. We have lost our softness. We have lost our humanity.

We need to rekindle compassion within us once more. All of us in some way have experienced being disappointed, humiliated, abandoned, ignored and lonely. These are our internal wounds which need to be

seen as opportunities to give birth to compassion for others and the whole of life. Trungpa Rinpoche calls these sore spots of our life the 'embryo of compassion stirring to be born'. This is the difficult part - to allow compassion to be born within us in spite of everything that has happened to us. Our vulnerability becomes our strength. Our suffering becomes an education in compassion.

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We need to reconnect with one another to protect our eco system. We need to learn from nature. There is a certain type of fungi which lives symbiotically with the roots of the trees. The trees and fungi need each other to survive. The fungi find water, absorb nutrients and protect trees by blocking harmful bacteria. They connect the roots of one tree to another. The trees, in turn, use the fungi to pass nutrients to one another. Also older trees pass nutrients through the fungi to young seedlings which need to grow larger and reach the sun's light. This underground network of fungi and trees helping one another protects the health of the entire ecosystem. This example of nature needs to prompt us to not allow anybody to suffer alone. Because if one suffers, all suffer. Because life is interconnected and interdependent.

And therefore it is with programs like Heroes of the Heart that we get reminded about this truth of life through the example of these giants of the heart. By reaching out they are reminding us that we cannot allow

anybody to suffer alone no matter what our own condition is.

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Four decades ago, Ms. Sindhutai Sapkal was abandoned by her husband. She turned to begging for a living, seeking refuge in cowsheds, cemeteries, and train stations. When she would sing at train stations and beg to earn a living, she noticed the large number of orphans who made the stations their home. She had been grappling with thoughts of suicide, but instead she felt a strong call to care for the children. The more of them she looked after, the more vigorously she begged. "It never occurred to me to not do this," Sapkal says. After a few years, with the help of supporters, Sapkal set up her first orphans' home in Chikhaldara, a town in rural Maharashtra. Today Sapkal runs four homes for orphans and others in need across India's state of Maharashtra, currently caring for more than 400 children and 150 women abandoned by their families. This is what is true compassion. This is what life is meant to be. Nobody should be in want. A true Hero of the Heart.

Daya Bai is a social activist and renowned social worker from Kerala who has been working for the welfare and upliftment of tribal people in central India for more than 50 years. She has also led agitations for forest dwellers in various states. I on behalf of all of us here salute you Daya Bai. In your work you have shown that the softness of life is the real hard. The palm tree will sway

all the way down in a storm but will bounce back without snapping.

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On this occasion where we are celebrating the 7 winners of this years Heroes of the Heart, we are also celebrating the beginning of a movement. A movement through which we would need to rediscover what life is all about. Not about grandeur and pomp and ostentation but quiet connection with others especially those in most need. Through the vulnerability of life we need to discover the strength of life. Life is a paradox. In the humble we see power. In the weak we see courage. In the ugly we see true beauty. May God give us the eyes to see and the grace to do, to act, to reach out to those in need in our own discreet and non ostentatious way. To become true heroes of the heart.

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As Martin Luther King Jr. said 'The world will get transformed only through compassion.'

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Thank You