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An Anthropology of Liberation

**Understanding human nature in the face of extreme poverty:
A discussion forum based on the thinking of Joseph Wresinski**

As we approach 2017, the centenary of Joseph Wresinski's birth, our next Campus will look at the human condition from the perspective of his work and ideas. Wresinski's thinking developed over the course of his life, based on years of work with people living in extreme poverty. Wresinski, who grew up in poverty himself, died in 1988 leaving a vast legacy, documented in written and audio-visual forms.

The five days of Campus will be an opportunity to discuss our different ideas about what it means to be human, as we "live together in order to think together". Individuals live in the context of different relationships—to their family as well as to other people or groups they identify with closely. These relationships place us in a community that is more than just where we came from or whom we live with. Because we are inextricably bound to our family and whatever community we feel a part of, these bonds become, in a way, a source of hope. The strength of these ties can help us realize that an individual cannot really be free and complete while those he or she is close to experience injustice or oppression. In other words, an essential element of personal liberty is knowing that those you are close to and identify with are free from injustice, discrimination or oppression.

We invite researchers and practitioners, new volunteers in training from ATD worldwide, and students working on their theses to explore what it means today to be facing unbearable poverty. Such poverty can deeply dehumanize us: not only the men, women and children who endure it, but also those who tolerate it, or even contribute to it.

In conditions where many saw hopeless and intractable destitution, Joseph Wresinski saw, instead, people who did not allow poverty to define them. Working every day amidst appalling deprivation, he nevertheless saw that deep down people were never resigned to living in poverty. Nor did they accept that anyone else should live that way. The memorial he inspired on the Paris Trocadero Plaza that was dedicated on October 17, 1987 (the first World Day for Overcoming Poverty) states this clearly: "Poverty does not have to exist". On the contrary, those who suffer such poverty can show us that, as Wresinski put it, "The time has come to put humanity first".

People must, however, continually try to rise above the things that limit us. We must attempt to disengage from what threatens to dehumanize us or cut us off from other people. Wresinski's thinking offers us an "anthropology of liberation", a perspective on the many ways that people can find personal freedom.

When we see people struggling to survive in terrible poverty, how are we inspired to oppose such conditions? How can we overcome the distrust between groups that causes some people to be excluded and ignored?

Joseph Wresinski showed us a way to live with the tensions and the contradictions that we all carry within us. Someone hard to recognize as a human being, or someone who feels not recognizable as a human being, can also be a person who, despite everything, still has hope. The person who seems to accept poverty, to be in compliance with it, can also be one who deeply opposes it. But how can our feelings of hope and opposition become actions that accomplish something?

As we work together to contend with the things that dehumanize us, everyone's ideas are important, but primarily those of people who experience a sweeping exclusion from society. We will look at the question of how to start from their ideas and, harnessing the energy and good will of everyone, build a society that welcomes everybody. We must find a way to end the incredible waste of unappreciated intelligence possessed by people in poverty. In their keen perceptiveness is a wealth of creativity used to confront, and often prevail over, situations that can be both desperate and crushing.

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