



Welcome to the 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum, Saudi Arabia

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Since we gathered in June 2019 in Tokyo as the G20 Interfaith Forum, the world's foundations have shifted. As you prepare to meet again starting October 13, this time looking at each other on computer screens rather than in person, this world's weight falls heavily on our, and your shoulders. But we share and are inspired by strong common threads of spiritual seeking. They drive both a passion to help and a hope that we can, as the Chinese character for crisis suggests, avoid the dangers we face and seize the opportunities that lie in our community, our collective spirit.

I and my colleagues treasure the memory of the 2019 gathering. What surprised me? Three things above all. First, the infinite variety of knowledge and wisdom that were on display, coming from so many different sources. Yes, the G20 leaders have much to learn from scholarship but even more from the wisdom that is the gift, the inheritance of great religious traditions. Second, I witnessed clearly the great passion and compassion that drives so many of you to advocate and fight against injustice and suffering, for example from trafficking, neglected orphans, the children who lack any chance to learn and play. Third, however, I remember well the joy that infused a serious event, when a circus troupe and an opera aria broke through the serious tone. It was a reminder of the happiness that culture can bring, the immense pleasure of creativity, the entrepreneurial spirit that we have within us. I hope you are able to capture all three elements this year: wisdom, passion for change, and creativity.

Each religious tradition brings special gifts to life. Some are shared, perhaps most of all the yearning for peace and virtue. But each tradition also adds to life's experience its distinctive spice and spirit. The Shinto tradition that has inspired me brings a deep sense of harmony with an invisible world, whose life forces are present in the elements, thus in nature, even in viruses that we cannot see but also anger, intolerance, unfairness. Yes, we see the spirits behind structural and systemic injustices that afflict our world even when they are invisible. We are constantly aware of hidden spirits that we call kami.

Some Kami are evil, with strength and numbers too great for any single being to overcome alone. We need to join together to defeat them. That applies now most of all for the effort to bring us out from the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to work together to assure that scientists and politicians join together to develop preventive measures including a vaccine that can protect us all.

But there are noble Kami also. A great gift of the Asian culture is the deep sense of community that imbues us with a sense of responsibility for our common welfare. We need that, to defeat hunger and poverty and to protect and nurture our children. Those in the community who have resources can draw on these spirits, making determined efforts to draw out evil Kami like binbogami, the kami of poverty. We will banish them from our homes and our lives. And we will honor, respect, and cherish the Kami that inspire human rights, love, care for neighbor, attention to the refugee, and those who are ill. The powerful Kami who give us hope and joy are those we call today.

This 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum faces both dangers and opportunities, confronting evil spirits even as it must honor and draw on the powerful good that lies deep within us.