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On the Passing of Dr. M.S. Swaminathan

A Tribute

by

Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn

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The most revered agricultural scientist on our planet is no longer with us.

Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, lauded by Time magazine as one of the twenty most influential Asians of the 20th century, treasured by Dr. Norman Borlaug as his indispensable brother in igniting the Green Revolution across India and the first recipient of the World Food Prize- - The Nobel Prize for Food and Agriculture, has passed away.

From India to Iowa and around the globe, the thousands, no millions, who have been touched by his innovative scientific prowess, his insightful policy recommendations and his inspirational humanitarian spirit are joining in mourning his loss and celebrating his century long leadership in confronting poverty, reducing hunger and uplifting the poorest farmers, the great majority of them women, while sustaining the environment for future generations.

I join with countless of his colleagues and all whose lives were touched by Dr. Swaminathan in sending our deepest and most heartfelt sympathy to his three exceptional daughters - - Soumya, Madhura and Nitya Rao - - and his entire family and the MSSRF staff at this profoundly difficult time. In addition, we offer our consolation to the people of India on the loss of one of your country's greatest heroes.

Born in 1925, M. S. Swaminathan came of age in the 1940s when the confluence of three great historical factors in India's history revised the trajectory of his career and his life with enormous consequences.

Inspired by the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, impacted by the tragic loss of millions of lives during the Great Bengal Famine and influenced by India's quest to achieve freedom and independence, young M. S. Swaminathan changed his academic focus from medicine to agriculture.

This fateful decision would lead him to a Ph.D. and then a post doctoral fellowship at the University of Wisconsin in the United States. It was there in 1953 that he encountered a young scientist who had been doing remarkable work with poor farmers in Mexico, named Norman Borlaug. Over a cup of tea at Rennenbohm's Drug store a life long bond was formed.

It was this personal connection that a decade later would lead M.S. Swaminathan to invite Norman Borlaug to come to India as that country and Pakistan faced imminent mass famine and starvation with millions of deaths likely.

The rest, as they say, is history. Together those two scientists convinced India to adopt new seeds and varieties of crops, new policies and new science-based amendments which saved millions and millions of lives and launched the single greatest period of food production and hunger reduction in human history - - The Green Revolution.

In 1987, our paths crossed in Manila where I was stationed as an American diplomat. Dr. Swaminathan, then the Director General of the International Rice Research Institute, received a high honor from Philippine president Corazon Aquino, who would two decades later accept my invitation to become a member of the World Food Prize Council of Advisors.

It was in that same year that Dr. Swaminathan was, most fittingly recognized as the first World Food Prize Laureate, the award that Dr. Borlaug created to be the equivalent of a Nobel Prize for Food and Agriculture. He used the \$200,000 cash prize to establish the MS Swaminathan Research Facility in Chennai.

It was in that role as Dean of the Laureates that I first met M.S. Swaminathan in 1999, when I assumed the role of president of the World Food Prize. Over the next two decades, I watched in awe as he provided leadership of the UN Hunger Task Force created by Secretary General Kofi Annan; put forward his vision for an Evergreen Revolution at the Borlaug Dialogue in Des Moines; and stressed the critical importance of biodiversity and nutrition..

When Norman Borlaug could no longer continue as chair of the Laureate Selection Committee, MS Swaminathan stepped forward to assume that responsibility. Reflecting his own focus on building peace through agriculture, in 2012, his committee chose Dr. Daniel Hillel of Israel, who had been nominated by three Muslim scientists from three Arab and Muslim countries, as the World Food Prize Laureate. UN Secretary General Ban Ki- moon came to Des Moines to join in the presentation of the World Food Prize to Dr. Hillel.

Like Dr. Borlaug, Dr. Swaminathan's favorite part of the World Food Prize was interacting with young high school age students both at the Global Youth Institute in Des Moines and in hosting a Borlaug - Ruan International Intern each year at his M.S. Swaminathan Research Facility in Chennai, India.

Perhaps the event involving Dr. Swaminathan that is most deeply etched in my memory came in 2007 when Norman Borlaug received the US Congressional Gold Medal -- America's highest civilian honor-- from the President of the United States in the Rotunda of the US Capitol in Washington D. C. Dr. M. S. Swaminathan was invited to speak about Dr. Borlaug.

At the conclusion of his remarks Dr. Swaminathan read a poem by Ranier Maria Rilke that he felt captured Norman Borlaug's contributions. It reads as follows:

*“Again and again in history  
Some special people wake up  
They have no ground in the crowd  
They move to broader laws  
They carry strange customs with them  
And demand room for bold and  
Audacious actions  
The future speaks ruthlessly through them  
They change the world”*

In August 2019, when I came to Chennai for what would be my last time to meet my mentor, my colleague and my dear friend, I quoted that poem to the large gathering saying it equally applies to Dr. Swaminathan himself.

M. S. Swaminathan, a son of India and a bold visionary, inspired by Gandhi, truly did "Change the World." As such, he will always have a rarefied place in the pantheon of our planet's most distinguished agricultural scientists and greatest humanitarian heroes.”

K. M. L.

