

# A meaningful life filled with hope

**DR ARTHUR DAHL** is President of the International Environment Forum and a retired Deputy Assistant Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), with 50 years' international experience in environment and sustainability. He has recently been consultant to the World Bank on indicators of development. He is also a committed member of the Bahá'í Faith which this year is celebrating the bicentenary of the birth of its founder. He spoke to **Marie Benoit** about a few of his many interests especially values and spirituality and youth

Dr Arthur Dahl is a scientist with a special interest in small island states. "The youth are our future," he maintains, "and for the sustainability of human society, we need to transmit our knowledge and experience to the next generation as they replace us." He believes that our generation has largely failed to address the problems of a globalised world, refusing to acknowledge the unity of the human race. "The recent student strikes for climate justice show that many young people have learned this lesson, and are ready to push for the fundamental transformation in society and the economy that the United Nations has called for in its 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals," he points out.

A man of action, he has joined the youth climate strikes and demonstrations to encourage the young to address and solve the problems of unsustainability that our generation is leaving for them. And this beyond what he has tried to do himself in his own long and meaningful career.

"The world of youth today is very different from the world we were brought up in. Adolescence can be turbulent; we can accompany teenagers but not control them. We can try to offer role models, and give teenagers opportunities to experience reality in our different professions, with scientific knowledge, and with the importance of values, ethics and spiritual perspective that can be a foundation for the lives they want to live. If they can themselves experience the pleasure that comes from altruistic acts of service to others and to the community, they will be vaccinated against the self-centred temptations of the consumer society. We can also give them hope in the future," he is convinced.

Dr Dahl has just published a book with precisely this aim: *In Pursuit of Hope: A Guide for the Seeker*. The book takes the reader on a quest in search of a more purposeful life amidst the environmental, social, economic and spiritual challenges of the 21st century.

"Hope," he believes, "has become a rare commodity in today's world. Everything seems to be going wrong, and the forces of disintegration are accelerating. We may wonder what will come first: a financial collapse, a climate catastrophe, a global pandemic, a third world war, or some equally disastrous outcome for a material civilisation out of control. The youth of the world in particular face dismal prospects. Yet there are also forces of integration at work; people making a difference and living lives of meaning. If there were more of them, that might help us to avoid the worst and turn the corner towards a brighter tomorrow."

Arthur Dahl has spent over half a century as an environmental scientist researching and spreading de-



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pressing news about the environmental crises on the horizon or already happening. So he asked himself what could he do to compensate and give some hope for the future. Why did he succeed in staying hopeful and motivated despite so much evidence to the contrary? Surprising as it may seem for a natural scientist, especially one specialising in complex ecosystems like coral reefs now threatened with disappearance, his answer came from his perspective as a member of the Bahá'í Faith, founded in the 19th century by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, which foretold the challenges we now face and proposed solutions.

He could see that science by itself did not have all the answers to the human condition, that ethical values and motivation had other roots, not contrary to science and reason, but complementary to them, creating a coherent whole. He then asked himself how could he capture his own journey of hope in a way that might make it accessible to others, particularly those of a rational, sceptical mindset. *In Pursuit of Hope* is the result. It is a guide to those wanting to stimulate

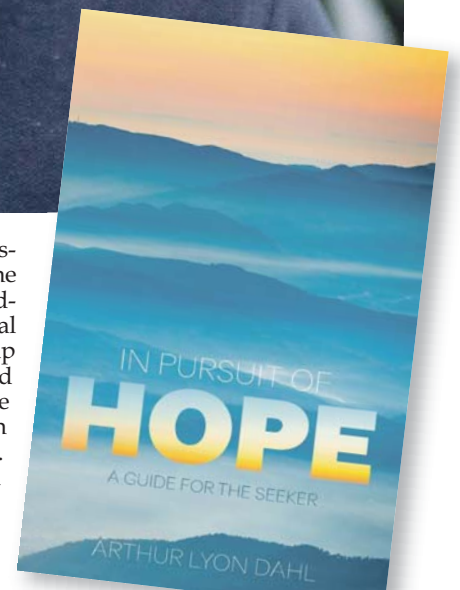
their own thinking and open their hearts to the better world that is possible and their role in building it.

A metaphorical journey across seven valleys and seven mountain ranges, it is a do-it-yourself guide for anyone who is seeking greater meaning in life. A companion for each step of the way, the book assists readers to ask the right questions and provides tools to help. He comments: "While it is impossible to know life's ultimate destination and what the future will bring, this book shows that it is possible to make a difference, contributing to change within your own life, the lives of those around you, and the planet as a whole."

Arthur Dahl is one of the founders of the International Environment Forum (<https://iefworld.org>), a Bahá'í-inspired scientific organization for environment and sustainability, with members in 75 countries that networks its members and others largely over the Internet, which is more environmentally responsible. Its conferences are all over the world, but are mostly intended to contribute scientific and ethical

perspectives to important discourses in society, whether at the United Nations, where it is accredited as a scientific/technological organisation, or in partnership with other organisations and events. With modern media, the impact of international events can spread far beyond the event itself.

What does being a Bahá'í mean to him? "The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith include unity of science and religion, which I have tried to live in my career as a scientist and Bahá'í. We feel that our highest purpose as human beings is to refine our characters with spiritual qualities and to contribute to the advancement of society, two aims which are best achieved through being of service to others, whether in our own local communities, our nations, or for the planet as a whole. I have spent much of my career living on islands and assisting small island developing states, and the beautiful diversity that island countries contribute to world society must be treasured and preserved. I am presently trying to contribute to global thinking on the need for stronger international governance through a re-



formed United Nations system, since this also reflects Bahá'í teachings on the unity of the whole human family in building a world civilisation."

Dr Arthur Dahl will be speaking on Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> October at 18:30 at Hilltop Gardens on *The Importance of Youth in Society Today*. He will also be speaking on the *Environmental and Sustainability Challenges of Small Islands* at the University of Malta and MCAST, and on Saturday 19 October at the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society on the *Sustainable Development Goals as Guides to Practical Action*.