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The True Method To Achieving Peace And Sustainability

Ladies and Gentlemen, honorable Judges, and my fellow competitors, Tonight, we gather not just to speak—but to reflect, to challenge, and to ignite change. One month from now marks a decade. Ten years since the world-193 nations stood together and made a promise. A promise to end poverty. To eliminate hunger. To fight for gender equality. To slow the march of climate change. To protect health and dignity for all. These were not just goals. They were promises, etched into the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, with a shared deadline: the year 2030. We are now halfway there. So, I ask you, *look around, look within*: Will gender equality be a reality in just five years? Will the food banks in Calgary no longer be lifelines for hundreds of thousands? Will our planet be a safe, thriving home for future generations? No matter what stance you take, according to the United Nations, only 17% of the world has made meaningful progress. Not because we didn't care. Not because we didn't try. But because the method, the way we've been trying, has been flawed. Good evening everyone, my name is Ali Abdi, and I believe that if we truly want peace and sustainability, we must change our approach. We must change our hearts.

Despite 10 long years of taking action to complete these goals, self-interest has played a crucial role in overshadowing our good intentions; people and countries often prioritize their own goals. The environment is a common casualty of self-interest, demonstrated through the events in Fairy Creek, British Columbia, in August of 2020. That year, the provincial court granted logging permits within Indigenous territories in Fairy Creek, leading protestors to build blockades around the logging areas. Despite the backlash, companies took the case to the Supreme Court and successfully prohibited protestors from protecting sacred land. As a consequence, hundreds of protestors were arrested despite their courage; their arrests became footnotes in a story of economic gain over environmental justice. This story portrays the cost of single-minded focus on boosting the economy, or increasing a company's gain, without caring for the opinion of people who live on the land or its environmental value. But there is another, deeper force at play, one that quietly divides us and blinds us to our shared humanity: tribalism. We live in a world that is more connected than ever before, yet we still think in terms of *us* and *them*. We see suffering in another country and say, "That's not our problem." We see injustice in another community and think, "That's their issue to solve." This instinct to separate ourselves from the pain of others has become one of the greatest barriers to progress. Tribalism and its inherent biases prevent us from seeing the world as a global village. They convince us that helping others somehow threatens our well-being. But the truth is, when we lift others, we rise too. When we protect the vulnerable, we strengthen the whole. And when we collaborate, not just across borders, but across beliefs, backgrounds, and biases, we unlock the true potential of

humanity. Naturally, people want to focus on boosting an economy because of the financial gains. But ironically, focusing purely on the economy has not been correlated to a country making progress towards fulfilling the sustainability goals. Countries like China and Saudi Arabia, economic giants in GDP and energy production, rank far below countries like Finland and Sweden in the UN's Sustainable Development Index. Why? Because wealth alone does not build a better world. Finland and Sweden have chosen a different path: investing in education, in well-being, in the environment. And they are now among the happiest nations on Earth.

So what do we do, with only five years left? We start here. We start now. Locally, in Calgary, a bioethanol plant called the Future Energy Park is being built, aiming to use low-class wheat to produce natural fuel and cattle feed. This project, and others like it, will create more jobs while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and will seek prior approval of the Environment Protection Act, which consults on the permission of Indigenous communities.

This is the kind of progress we need, but we need more than projects. We need people. That is why I am developing a website that allows you to search for any endangered species, plant, insect, or animal in your city. For example, in Calgary, the burrowing owl is one of the most endangered species here; in Banff, it is the Banff Springs Snail. Once you find an animal or something that interests you, it will provide you with brief information about the animal, a printable pamphlet about this animal to share with your neighbours and educate them about the species, and all to make a collective effort to save it, whether it's keeping your cat indoors or planting endangered flora in your garden. This will allow communities to come together and work on a problem that they all feel is worth solving. It will give them something to bond over and allow them to learn the importance of one another's opinions and methods for preserving the animal's livelihood. By saving an endangered animal, you allow the promotion of green spaces, which have been proven to decrease the stress of people and boost their happiness. Additionally, you give people the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with their neighbours, promoting peace and friendship. Furthermore, I believe we should work towards building volunteer projects and programs in universities that educate and equip children with the tools they need to build social etiquette, employment, and environmental treatment. An example is the University of Alberta implementing the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program, tailored for underrepresented groups, which can equip them with the skills they need to thrive in society. By creating spaces for collaboration and reconciliation, we can harness the full potential of our society, transforming our individual experiences into one of shared success.

To conclude, the Sustainable Development Goals were a beacon, a chance to unite the world in solving its greatest challenges. And while we may not reach every goal by 2030, we can still build a future that is just, green, and peaceful. But only if we choose collaboration over competition. Compassion over convenience. And courage over comfort.

So I ask you again—not as a speaker, but as a fellow human being:
Will you be part of the change?

Thank you.