

THE MIGHTY MEET IN COLORADO FOR A HIGH-ALTITUDE DISCUSSION

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ASPEN, Colo. – Globalization. The word conjures up images of mistrust and fear, or street protests at international conferences.

This weekend, however, the images are mountain meadows, sagebrush and dusty-red hills, and quaking aspen trees. That's the setting for the "Globalization and the Human Condition" symposium at the Aspen Institute, which is celebrating 50 years of bringing together world and community leaders to improve their skills by discussing, of all things, world literature. About 2,000 people – including CEOs and environmentalists, poets and pundits – are convening on the institute's 40-acre campus to address and argue about topics ranging from peace and security, to science and technology, to human rights and the human imagination.

The diverse list of participants – which includes former President Jimmy Carter, Nobel laureate and former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, oceanographer Sylvia Earle, Queen Noor of Jordan, and Sun Microsystems cofounder Bill Joy – speaks to the cachet the institute has built up over the years.

"The Aspen Institute has been for 50 years a place where people can come together, hear different points of view, argue and discuss," said writer and philosopher Sissela Bok of Harvard, who will speak on ethics and globalization.

What began as one man's desire to teach primarily white businessmen to think beyond profit-and-loss statements has turned into a place where leaders – ranging from government and corporate figures to school principals and community officials – explore an equally diverse range of readings.

The idea is that for these people, who are usually surrounded by people who constantly agree with them, being in a room with others who freely disagree with them is an awakening. There's a long-term "ripple effect, founder Walter Paepcke was fond of saying, improving life and work for those around them.

Aspen was a rundown ski town when Paepcke came across it in the late 1930s. Paepcke, president of Chicago-based Container Corp. of America, envisioned a cultural mecca away from the distractions of big cities. His vision, shared by his wife, Elizabeth, makes Aspen unique among American resort towns.

Blessed with spectacular scenery and an abundance of outdoor activities, Aspen could nurture body, mind and spirit. Aspen Skiing Co., which Paepcke began in 1945, was the beginning. The Institute followed in 1950.

Its outgrowths, which share the campus, are the Aspen Music Festival, the Aspen Center for Physics, and the International Design Conference in Aspen.

Publisher Henry Luce suggested to Paepcke that for economic and practical reasons, the institute focus on “the great intellectually unwashed of America, the businessman.” The institute’s executive seminars were born, and for years, they were run with an iron fist by University of Chicago professor Mortimer Adler, who advocated knowledge that is not scientific.

An outgrowth of the University of Chicago’s Great Books Program, the executive seminars were based on the idea that the classics wrestled with many challenges we face today. But the seminars evolved beyond the Great Books format and now encompass a much greater diversity of participants.

The discussions at the institute can have practical results.

Take Johnson & Johnson’s prompt response in 1982 to learning that its Tylenol capsules had been laced with cyanide after leaving the plant, resulting in seven deaths. Not only did the company – which had no involvement in the poisoning – recall all Tylenol on the market, it developed tamper-proof packaging.

Johnson & Johnson vice chairman David E. Collins had completed an executive seminar just six weeks before.

More recently, Judith Glickman, a California school superintendent, has used her experience here to build consensus. Everything from labor negotiations to school board meetings can benefit from simply discussing a reading, she says.

The institute’s headquarters is in Washington, with offices in Aspen, Chicago, New York, Santa Barbara, Calif., and Queenstown, Md. It also supports programs through partners in Europe and Asia.

But it is the Aspen campus that best illustrates the institute’s commitment to beauty on an equal footing with other issues. The Modernist campus built in 1956 – think Mondrian in the mountains – consists of rectangular Bauhaus-influenced buildings decorated mainly in primary colors, with ample windows to take advantage of views that include Aspen Mountain, home to Aspen’s first ski lift.

A Marble Garden and small parks of earth, rock and grass sculptures provide opportunities for reflection.

The topic of beauty arose quickly at a weekend symposium. After reading Elaine Scarry’s book “On Beauty and Being Just,” institute president Elmer Johnson immediately invited the Harvard professor to join historian Stephen Ambrose and others in discussing globalization and the human imagination.

Though this weekend's activities commemorate the 1950 establishment of the institute, the origins go back to a year earlier, to the Goethe Bicentennial held in Aspen 200 years after the poet's birth.

Albert Schweitzer made his only trip to the United States to attend, as well as such luminaries as Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Thornton Wilder, and pianist Artur Schnabel.

"They talked about truth, beauty and goodness," said Johnson. "So in a way, we're returning to our roots."