

**What We Mean America to Be:  
Economy, Democracy, and Our Religious Principles  
February 22, 2009**

In a 2003 article entitled “Democracy and its Global Roots,” Nobel Prize winner for Economics, Amartya Sen, recalls a brief story of Greek emperor Alexander the Great: “When Alexander asked a group of Jain philosophers in India why they were paying so little attention to the great conqueror,” Sen writes,

He got the following reply, which directly questioned the legitimacy of inequality: “King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth’s surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, traveling many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others!... You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.”

A pithy story, one upon which we could spend the rest of the hour quietly meditating. But, so as to fulfill at least some of my ministerial duties, let me at least provide a kind of guided meditation, by exploring aloud the implications of the story, particularly in light of both our religious and our American lives.

Right now, with the stock market and the housing market continuing to decline, with business after business laying off their workers, and with both individual and corporate greed showing up in the headlines on a regular basis, we are in a time of heightened anxiety about our *own* possessions we have on this earth—whether those possessions be our homes, our retirement funds, our jobs, our families, our health, or all of the above. Such anxiety raises questions, as do the Jain philosophers in their response to Alexander, of equality and inequality. What is our equal share? Are we all

getting our equal share? How should we each strive to acquire and maintain our share? And when, if ever, do we mistake too much for enough? When does equal slip over into unequal?

Such questions can and must be asked on a systemic as much as on an individual level. Peter Gosselin, author of *High Wire: The Precarious Financial Lives of American Families*, states, as we heard Maxine read, that “much of what’s driving recent changes in the economy and in working Americans’ circumstances is almost certainly powerful and *impersonal* forces [emphasis on impersonal] like technological innovation and globalization.” We can’t, I hear Gosselin saying, point a finger at any one particular person about what’s happening, because so much of what’s happening is on a level beyond any one person’s personal control.

But, despite these forces being *systemic*, as Gosselin says, “much of the *adjustment* to these forces appears to have been left to individuals and their families to handle.”

Now, I’ve been meeting, by the way, with *Wildflower* individuals and families, as have others, in the past month, asking them to share with me how the economic situation is affecting their lives—how they are, in other words, handling it. We’re doing this as part of our work with Austin Interfaith. Now, I have to admit, when I first set out to do this, I believed that I would mostly hear that people weren’t really being affected all that much, that somehow, Unitarian Universalists or Wildflowers would be essentially immune to what’s happening in that world out there. But the more I talk to people, the deeper I see how insidiously the economic downturn is cutting into people’s lives and into our community at large. Within our own congregation, retirements are having

to be delayed, health care is unaffordable, couples are living paycheck to paycheck, which still doesn't quite cover everything, and those with secure governmental jobs are seeing hiring freezes, which may not mean layoffs, but which does mean more work and more stress for them.

Even those people I've talked to who feel completely sound in their homes and jobs have expressed their own witness to the crisis through those they work with, whether they're teachers working with students whose families are struggling, hospital staff who see emergency rooms being flooded by those who have no health insurance and so wait till they can't *not* see a doctor, or police officers seeing and working with the effects of a rise in homelessness. Thus, even if not being directly, personally affected, people's environments become affected, which means, actually, that yes they are being affected, even if only indirectly.

Which brings me back to Gosselin, who says, “the current generation of working Americans has been assigned the all-consuming task of being society’s first responder to forces well beyond anyone’s ability to control or even fully understand.” That is, though we can’t point to a personal *cause* of all that is happening economically around us, it too often comes down to individuals having to *respond* personally, because there is no system sufficient or just enough to do so.

But how can we take on all that we have to take on? How is it conceivable for isolated individuals to take on entire systems that are too vast to see or understand in their entirety though the eyes of one person? Says Gosselin, “It is almost as if the Mayflower Compact has been flipped on its head.” Now, what’s the Mayflower Compact? In Gosselin’s words, it was an agreement among the Plymouth colonists to “certain minimal obligations to each other and to society...” In the words of the

Compact itself, those who signed it did “solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation...” As a means of preserving this body politic, they would, quote, “enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.”

The *general good* of the colony, unto which *we* promise all due submission and obedience: A reminder that, indeed, we are all in this together. This philosophy, this covenanting to work with and support one another, according to Gosselin, is what’s been, in modern times, flipped on its head.

Now, of course, even before our cumulative acts of turning the Mayflower Compact upside down, there's one small glitch in the Pilgrims' vision, and that's that with time, and with more and more Europeans landing in the new world, the general good of the colony didn't equal the general good of the continent. We all know that those already living here when the Mayflower arrived were, year by year, decade by decade, century by century, usurped of their place, traditions, dignity, culture, and very lives. Even when a democratic ideal such as is written up in the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution, even when such an ideal fulfills the needs of its own, we sometimes fumble, badly, in trying to live out such ideals in the company, or global neighborhood, of others. It might sometimes be said of democracies like ours, as the Jains said to Alexander the emperor, "you are always busy and up to no good, traveling

many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others!”

And we hear such critiques from our own countrymen and women who are called to remind us of this fact. Princeton University Religion Professor Cornell West vividly spells out our country’s own self-perpetuating, self-defeating, anti-democratic values and behaviors when he lists, in his 2003 book *Democracy Matters*, free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism as the three primary culprits of our fumbling democracy. Such culprits are haunting echoes of what, in *his* 1967 sermon against the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, Jr. deemed to be the “giant triplets” of racism, materialism, and militarism. Alive and well, they seem to be.

Of course, in this new political era, there is indication that racism, as well as authoritarianism, is on the wane, and

our current president is striving to confront the effects of materialism and free-market fundamentalism with a plan to revive the economy, saving more people from losing homes and jobs.

But since we here at Wildflower Church are a religious community, and since we strive to live by our religious principles as much as by democratic ones, let me return to what Cornell West claims to be the “three crucial traditions [that] fuel deep democratic energies,” and which thus, at least implicitly, call us to strive against the anti-democratic habits, or addictions, of free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism. West says of Socratic philosophy that, “the Socratic commitment to questioning requires a relentless self-examination and critique on institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency.” Sound familiar?

It's our fifth principle: the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Next West states that, “in the face of callous indifference to the suffering wrought by our imperialism, we must draw on the prophetic. The Jewish invention of the prophetic commitment to justice—also central to Christianity and Islam,” West notes, “is one of the great moral moments in human history.” In this I hear our second principle—justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. I also hear our sixth principle, the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for *all*.

And finally, West claims, “in the face of cynical and disillusioned acquiescence to the status quo, we must draw on the tragicomic. Tragicomic hope,” says West, “is a profound attitude toward life reflected in the work of artistic geniuses...” In American culture, West holds especially high among those

geniuses Blues musicians. He quotes writer Ralph Ellison who states,

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.

Contrast the aching consciousness of the blues to what West calls "a sleepwalking U.S. citizenry." Contrast the purpose of the blues, squeezing out a "near-tragic, near-comic lyricism," to the purpose of manufactured music like that of the Jonas Brothers or Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus, all of whom have far, far more marketing products than songs to their names. The blues remind me of historic American cities like Chicago or New Orleans. The others remind me of, well, Target.

And you can find Target, and other such chains, in just about every American city, historic or not. Which makes me think a little bit about empire, and the Jain idea of possessing “only so much of the earth’s surface as this we are standing on,” or not.

Of course, in the case of Alexander, the Jains, whose spiritual practice includes, among other things, *aparigraha*, or non-possession, the Jains are the perfect ones to challenge the emperor to see things from a slightly humbler perspective than he is used to.

As we in this sanctuary are neither emperors nor Jains (that I’m aware of), but perhaps somewhere in between, how do we wake up in our citizenry and walk together, with eyes wide open, into the economic health our country so desperately needs? If Cornell West is right, we stand between the polar opposites not only of Alexander and the Jains, but of

free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism on the one hand; and Socratic questioning, Judaic prophetic witness, and blues-articulated tragicomic hope, on the other. In which direction shall we walk?

I invite us to walk in the direction of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I invite us to walk in the direction of Micah, chapter 6 verse 8, which asks, “What does the Lord require of you?” and which answers, “To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” I invite us to listen to and learn from the blues not, as West says, as “simply a music to titillate,” but as “a hard-fought way of life.”

For a truly democratic way of life *is* a hard-fought way of life. It takes us asking ourselves, what’s my equal share, how shall I acquire it, and how will I help ensure, in the spirit of

the Mayflower Compact, that others get their fair share as well? A truly democratic way of life struggles to ensure we neither violate our values by exploding into empire, nor that we *implode* by putting the weight of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness solely on the shoulders of individuals while neglecting to maintain systems that are there to lighten that load.

We all have a long road ahead of us. But we can walk it together, consciously, mindfully. We can walk it not only as *one* community of faith, but in partnership with a wider network of communities, striving and working together to create a collective voice for the needs of our citizens. That's why I ask you to continue to support the work we are doing with Austin Interfaith.

But whether within these walls, or together in that world out there, remember, we have arrived, to quote Universalist

minister Kenneth Patton, “out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets.” We have come here “to be assured that brothers and sisters surround us... The warmth of their hands assures us, and the gladness of our spoken names.”

So may it be that in these economically challenging times, we come to be neither burdened by nor burdensome as such emperors as Alexander, but that we live our religious principles and our democratic ones so that we can indeed proclaim, in the words of Kenneth Patton, “This is the reason of cities, of homes, of assemblies in the houses of worship. It is good to be with one another.”

Amen.

Please rise as you are able and join in singing hymn #207,  
Earth Was Given as a Garden