

In a Threatened World, What is Our Work?

Joseph Gainza – Feb. 28, 2010 – Unitarian Church of Montpelier

Today the human race and the planet we depend on for life is facing a great many, interrelated threats, not only to justice and peace but also to the very continuance of life. These threats, many of which have reached crisis proportions, range from local, even interpersonal abuses of power to international crises which affect the lives of all people, of all life on this fragile and beautiful earth. I'm sure if we went around this sanctuary we could develop quite a long list of such threats and still not cover the reality. We would also likely get different opinions about whether there is a core threat confronting us and what it might be.

To be sure, what brings us hope is that there are movements addressing every level of threat, movements which resist and seek to overcome these violations of human rights and human dignity and the destruction of the natural world. From confronting domestic violence to educating about and combating global warming, people are organizing and waging campaigns. There are many, many movements working for positive change, such as union organizing, the development of local economies, promoting fair trade which supports workers and defends the environment and, more locally, creating a nuclear free and renewable energy future. These movements have several elements in common, among which is care and concern for others and our common heritage.

I believe there is a core threat underlying most, if not all of the threats we face today. I believe it to be a spiritual crisis, the failure to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life and the subsequent tendency to see certain of our fellow human beings as "Other" and therefore not worthy of our care and respect, to see the natural world as little more than resources to be used and used up.

By "spiritual" I mean the reality that all humanity, indeed all life, is interrelated; we are, as all the major religions tell us, one, a unity; in Christian terms, we are the "body of Christ." A spiritual sensibility recognizes that we are relational beings who become persons in the presence of other persons and that we are intimately and essentially connected to the earth and the countless life forms with whom we share creation.

You know, my computer spell check tells me to replace "whom" in that sentence with "which," thus degrading all non-human life from a "who" to a "what," and therefore illustrating my point. Our powerful technology has the tendency to turn subjects into objects. How many times have you heard our mind compared to a super computer, and other technological metaphors employed to describe human beings and human behavior?

But all is not lost. Today our religious traditions are joined by biologists who tell us that genetically humanity is not divided into races and ethnicities but have a common genetic

heritage with only minor differences. The science of ecology demonstrates that all life is intertwined and that diversity is essential for health. Astrophysicists tell us that we are all made from “star stuff” and pictures from space show the earth to be a unified body without borders or walls.

A hopeful sign is that religion and science are both describing the world as community. The historic division between faith and reason, which began in the West about 400 years ago, is being bridged as we recognize both are essential for a deeper and more fruitful appreciation for the ever evolving mystery of existence. Perhaps we are entering into an age where there will be greater appreciation for uncertainty. A few years ago the NYT Science Times section reported that some scientists, confronting “dark energy,” which makes up 74% of the composition of the universe, are “despairing” of ever being able to “explain” the universe. I think they should not despair but rather bow their heads in gratitude and acknowledge the vital importance of mystery in our individual and collective lives. Would any of us ever want to be “explained?”

I believe that the lust for certitude, about the universe, about God, about history, about people, fuels the fears and hatreds which enable some people, certain of their cause, to oppress other people, to shoot them, to slaughter them with machetes or with atomic bombs with names like “Little Boy” and “Fat Man.”

So a certain degree of uncertainty, of knowing that ultimately we are embedded in mystery, may make us a little more humble and less willing to commit violence to enforce our “truth.” I use the term “mystery” here to mean, not the unknowable, but the infinitely knowable, the ever receding horizon toward which we journey. For every answer science provides, many more questions emerge.

My hope is that when we become comfortable living in bountiful mystery, we will accept the rightness, the wisdom of non-violence as the most promising form of intercourse amongst humans and between humanity and all life on earth.

Our great teachers of non-violence: Jesus, Gandhi, A.J. Muste, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others, tell us that commitment to non-violence means a preference to endure violence rather than inflict it. This is hard for U.S. Americans to hear as our nation has become so proficient in inflicting violence on others to defend our so-called “national interests.” Our difficulty in embracing non-violence is, I submit, a mark of the spiritual malaise we struggle with as individuals and as a nation.

While our spiritual crisis is not new or the result of particular, definable historical events or processes; while it predates the modern world, and may always be a part of the human condition, our age, our times have brought things to a head. Human beings now have the power to end all life on earth. Today’s machines and weapons can devastate vast tracts of the natural

world and entire cities. Human made toxins permeate every nook of the living earth, from the shrinking polar ice caps to the depths of the acidifying oceans. The pervasiveness of powerful weaponry enables relatively few people to commit genocide. Vastly expanded communication and transportation technologies bring both benefits and detriments to others half a world away as ancient cultures evaporate in the face of the modern culture of commerce. The globalization of the economy, while bringing wealth to many, impoverishes many more while speeding the consumption of the natural world and driving global warming. And we have seen that more than religion, it is the fear of losing our material wealth that is the opium of the people.

This spiritual crisis plays out as many political crises, such as the use of power to maintain positions of dominance and inequality, the undermining of democratic structures and processes, the weakening of international law and institutions, the perpetration of violence against entire populations to seize control of their resources. The spiritual crisis is also expressed in economic and social injustice; as Holly Sklar has said, in the new colonialism nations can have their own flag, but not their own economy. It is on these levels that we confront in a practical way the spiritual crisis in which we are all embedded and which each of us experiences within ourselves.

We share responsibility for the present moment, but this is not to say that each and every person is equally responsible for the destruction and the many crises confronting us. The late Utah Philips put it this way: the earth is not dying, it is being killed, and the killers have names and addresses. We must not be naive and forget that there is a ruling class in this nation which has more in common with the elites of other nations than they have with the rest of their fellow citizens. We must know that the status quo favors the rich and powerful or it would be changed. As the Quakers say, we must speak truth to power. And while we can never know the “whole truth,” we must act with the best information we have, grounded in openness to that of the divine, and therefore truth, in those whose actions we oppose.

A sentence in the Mission Statement of the American Friends Service Committee sums it up neatly: “This AFSC community works to transform conditions and relationships both in the world and in ourselves, which threaten to overwhelm what is precious in human beings.”

This generation is faced with unprecedented challenges and opportunities. But until the creativity of billions of people is tapped and allowed meaningful expression with adequate resources, humanity may be overwhelmed by disaster on a global scale. But meaningful expression and the provision of adequate resources on a scale to meet the challenge can only occur when we overcome our fear of the Other, our fear of losing what we have come to expect as rightly ours, consumption without responsibility. And we must experience in our gut the unity and interrelatedness of all life.

We have allowed commercial culture to define our age and to some extent our very selves. This culture extols competition over cooperation, getting ahead over service, competence over goodness, looks over substance, control over nurturance, the market over community, the

economy over the natural world, growth over sustainability, looking out for number one over the common good. While capitalism is not responsible for the spiritual crisis, it certainly exacerbates it as making and accumulating money is considered the highest social good, or at least is rewarded more than every other endeavor. With continual growth in consumption as its animating principle, rather than a fair distribution of the necessities of life, Capitalism is the driving force of commercial culture.

This has all come to a head with what has been called the “financialization” of the U.S. economy which precipitated the economic crisis we are presently suffering.

This is the economic model being promoted to the rest of the world. And countries are adopting it because local elites maintain enough power to impose it on the rest of their nation, or the overwhelming economic, military and political power of the wealthy nations is used to force poorer nations into the corporation dominated global economy. When the name of the game is privatization, governments find it harder and harder to plan and act for the common good.

And now we have the US Supreme Court’s 5-4 ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* mirroring the shameful decision in the 1857 Dred Scott case where a human being was declared property, with a ruling which declares property a person.

While certainly more complex than I can relate here, this is basically the world which we confront. It could feel overwhelming until we remember that the majority of people prefer that it be different, prefer a world where everyone has the means to live a fulfilling life, and want to see the earth restored to health and set on a course of sustainability. Who would not want their children and grandchildren, and their grandchildren’s grandchildren to have such a life? The only people to oppose a move toward such a world are those who think they are doing just fine with the status quo, or who fear that a movement toward that world would jeopardize all they have worked so hard to obtain. And on one level the rich and powerful do think that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and they have the means to impose it on the rest of us.

Our work must be to provide sustenance to, and to amplify the voices of those marginalized and oppressed in such a world.

We must seek to understand and address the root causes of poverty, injustice, and war. To act with courage and vision in taking initiatives that may not be popular. I would not be surprised if many of you have been called nasty names for standing up for justice, and peace.

As people of faith with higher aspirations for humanity and our common life, we are called to confront, nonviolently, powerful institutions of violence, evil, oppression, and injustice. Such actions may engage us in creative tumult and tension in the process of basic change. But we must seek opportunities to help reconcile enemies and to facilitate a peaceful and just resolution of conflict.

Specifically, along this line, we must continue organizing to bring all U.S. troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan, to provide alternatives to enlistment in the military which many choose for the development of job skills or to receive money for a college education. Many are working with war veterans and active duty soldiers and Marines to catalyze resistance within the military to the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations. Others are organizing opposition to the almost 1,000 US military bases and installations which the Pentagon maintains around the world as part of its infrastructure for empire. Still others support groups who bridge historic antagonisms between communities which lead to violence, such as in the Middle East with Israelis and Palestinians.

Around the world people are working to relieve and prevent suffering through both immediate aid and long-term development and seeking to serve the needs of people on all sides of violent strife. Here in Vermont there have been several benefits for Haiti as it recovers from the devastating earthquake.

Also in Vermont groups have sprung up to work with immigrant and refugee communities in their struggle for recognition and respect because justice, liberty, and dignity aren't privileges, they're inherent human rights. Similarly Vermonters have come together to provide support and service for the over 2,000 migrant farm workers in the state, many of whom are undocumented, helping to keep our farms and rural culture alive. These are acts of connection and solidarity.

As we seek to transform the institutions of society, by engaging in the work to overcome injustice, to restore the earth and to establish a lasting and sustainable peace, we ourselves will be transformed. As we work in the world around us, our awareness grows that our own life must change to reflect the same goals we urge others to achieve. While working for social change, if we are mindful of our own need to grow in love and understanding, being gentle with ourselves as we strive to be gentle with others, we will, in essence, become more spiritual.

The path to this future must be through non-violence, and that work must be done simultaneously within and amongst each and every one of us.

It is time for us, again as the Quakers say, "to see what love can do..."