

July 2, 2006

**“To Build the Common Good”**

Rev. Julie Kain

Something is happening in our country right now that is hopeful for religious liberals. We heard a little bit about it already this morning when David spoke. Rabbi Michael Lerner and the Network of Spiritual Progressives that he is helping to form are spearheading a new social movement in our country that would like to become as strong and effective as the civil rights movement and the women’s movement in our country before it. The movement is also building momentum from the anti-nuclear, anti-war and environmental movements that we have experienced as well. I’m not aware of a specific name in which to label the current burgeoning movement, but this morning I would like to call it a new social movement to reclaim the American political ideals of freedom and liberty for all, not just all of here in the United States, but for all of here in the larger world community that shares inhabitation of this precious and most unusual planet, Earth.

For many of us who try our best to keep informed about the daily events of the world through various news sources, we may consider the prospect of reclaiming of the noble American ideals of freedom and liberty for all laden with frustration, cynicism, anger and even despair and hopelessness at times. Frankly, it is quite difficult indeed to continue taking a daily dose of the news and not feel somewhat sickened to the death of our souls. I agree with that pithy bumper sticker “if you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention,” but what to do about it? How can we feel that with the power we do have in our own lives that we can actually make a difference?

Let’s stop just a moment to look at that question again. Many of us visit it with some frequency in our lives. How can we feel that with the power we do have in our own lives that we can actually make a difference in this world? You might be tempted to call this just a case of semantics, but bear with me a moment because I propose that even our question, this particular question, reveals an underlying assumption at work that all too often allows to mislead us. There are reasons for that. We are conditioned to think that we don’t actually make a difference. The assumption that we don’t actually make a difference is that we have to decide what the difference is that we want to make and then do it, but really, if you take time to think about it, we are making a difference all the time. The more pointed question is are we actually making the difference that we want to make rather than just going along with the flow and thinking that there are others out there who have more intrinsic power than we do and they are the ones making either a positive or a negative impact, not little old me.

The reason I’m drawing our attention to the assumption within the question is not to feel bad about ourselves for not recognizing our own power, but rather to become more aware of how certain basic thoughts become a foundation for our actions or lack thereof. One thing that is very exciting to me about Michael Lerner’s work with the Network of Spiritual Progressives is that they recognize the critical importance of taking personal responsibility in one’s life to live with intention and growing awareness

and to join with others who have similar values so that together we can take social responsibility for the life in our communities, both human and environmental. In Michael Lerner's most recent book, *The Left Hand of God* with the subtitle *Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*, he outlines with some very provocative specifics just how we can join together personally and socially to express our religious values and to make a difference in the public square. I encourage anyone who has an interest in these matters to do your own exploration of the book and the current activities of the alliance being built under the name of the Network of Spiritual Progressives. I personally believe we are on to something that has great potential for mobilizing our energies in some dramatically new ways.

But today I am compelled to focus on just one aspect in the movement to reclaim the ideals of freedom and justice for all and that is to challenge some of the economic assumptions that we make as individuals and that are operating in our world today both at the nation and international levels. The economic assumptions at work in the world have unfortunately come to dominate the entire world's political systems and the same assumptions were at work actually in Philadelphia at that Second Continental Congress in which not without much struggle our own Declaration of Independence was put forth some two-hundred and thirty years ago this very week. Our prevailing economic theory and practice since the time of the Enlightenment thinks has been that we as humans are most essentially self-interested individuals who long to acquire the most goods and services we are able to for the smallest amount of work possible. Once we acquire enough capital to invest we are then expected to focus it on locating our resources on wherever the greatest possible return on our investments might be made, increasing our overall personal net worth.

This common marketplace rationality which is referred to in today's centering thought has the basic assumption of humans as self individuals and it is widespread, both conscious and unconscious, and because of that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We expect unbridled growth of the world's economy to be the contemporary god of salvation for our modern world and to this degree the rule of economics on our global scene is somewhat idolatrous. It is based on a false assumption that human needs and wants are unlimited and so are the material resources to meet them and so we continue unfortunately on a dangerous path to frantically increase economic productivity of the world's nations in a somewhat futile attempt to somehow spread basic comfort and wealth globally. Because of this we have allowed transnational corporations to be given an amazing license to work without moral restraints with the assumption that if they do increase economic productivity the entire world will be better eventually from the trickle-down theory. Yet, we see blatantly this approach is failing to work meanwhile holding on to it very tightly. Gandhi said, "the earth has enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed."

Sometimes I really wonder through our slick advertising campaigns and our righteous sounding political and economic theories if we aren't actually trying to promote greed as some sort of moral virtue. In our current working model of global economics, people are viewed as self-interested individuals within the global marketplace. The broader

human community is conspicuously absent from the model and this is why in the interest of what is called free trade for example, decisions can be made at extreme distances from the human and environmental communities impacted and the decisions are based on impersonal principles of maximum profit and growth productivity. The actual destruction of human communities and the degradation of our precious biosphere simply do not show up in the ledger as factors worth considering. Therefore, we have a system that believes it is doing much good by increasing the global domestic product but is actually creating many violent consequences on unsuspecting participants. Once whole peoples become dependent on imports for survival, for example, because they have focused over time on specialized production in their particular region, holding their place in the global marketplace, they are no longer free not to trade. The greater the specialization of regional production and its counterpart longer supply lines to the consumer the less actual control, freedom and determination that local economies actually have. I submit that the greatest challenge of our time is the creation of a global community of free peoples, not the subordination of all of us, all of the world's inhabitants to a relatively few transnational corporations.

Our current economic system threatens world peace and the full realization of democratic ideals. It is not that much different as what was taking place during the time of the Declaration of Independence. The British Colonies were threatened in their economic order and because of that the democratic principles that were originally in our Declaration of Independence were defeated. Let me say more about that. Thomas Jefferson who was enticed really to write the template for our declaration despite the fact that he himself did have slaves, included in the original declaration an anti-slavery clause. He could clearly in the process of writing this important historical document that the moral vision of our nation at its birth could not with a clear conscience condone slavery and yet the clause was removed from the declaration, not just because of the presence of the southern colonies but the northern colonies were complicit as well. The fortunes of Boston and the other northern cities were equally tied to the slave trade and its supply of laborers for building our new world. At that historical moment John Adams knew that our founding fathers would not be forgotten for stepping back from doing the right thing when the opportunity presented itself. Even Edward Rutledge knew it, he was the representative from South Carolina who insisted the clause be removed for the economic stability not just of the southern but of all the colonies and the rest of the south was waiting to decide their vote on the same issues. We all know that it was nearly a hundred years later when the Emancipation Proclamation actually reversed our original legislation on the issues of slavery, but Edward Rutledge after leaving Philadelphia and signing the Declaration of Independence, went back to South Carolina and freed his slaves.

I invite you now to take a moment and look at the cover of your order of service today and notice the image of legos there as a metaphor of building blocks for the common good. Think about this: imagine what it might look like in our world today if instead of the building block of ever-increasing productivity and economic growth at all costs, we had the basic building block of economic participation based on contributions to the well-being of human and environmental communities. What if every single action that

we take having an economic aspect or consequence, we asked ourselves “does this action contribute to my material well-being and worth or does it contribute more to the well-being of human and/or environmental communities?” We do actually make a real difference every single day. It’s the result of where we put our time, energy, and resources. The real question is: are we making the difference we really want to make? I truly believe we can but sometimes it means we have to challenge even our own ways of thinking about the world and what we can do to make it a better place. May we all be open to the guidance and strength to make it so.

Amen.