

Repairing the World

(sermon by Deane M. Perkins)

One of the major items that is usually auctioned off at an annual church auction is the Minister's Sermon. This is where the winning person, say for a mere \$300, can ask the minister to do a sermon on **any** topic the winner chooses.

I will tell you now that I have never done this. I have never allowed a church fundraising committee or auction people ever to cajole me into engaging in an activity about which I have great fear.

Yes, I admit that I fear church auction item number 666—the dreaded Minister's Sermon! I fear that someone would choose something that is so arcane or esoteric or so out of my depth that I simply would have no clue. And I would have to confess my shortcomings in front of the entire congregation, and

the congregation would know—they would truly and definitively know-- how human and limited I am.

While I can poke fun at my own shortcomings and fears, Rev. Tom Owen-Towle, in his fine book on ministry entitled, *Love Meets the Dragons*, gives a list of common fears among ministers, the **first** of which is: “Fear of being an impostor, so if parishioners really learned how little I know or believe, they might fire me on the spot.” (*Love Meets the Dragon*, by Tom Owen-Towle, pg. 32)

Believe me, whenever ministers are in a retreat and something on this line is mentioned, we all nod our heads in recognition and acknowledgement. Tom continues his list of what ministers fear, all of which is so very true:

“Fear of failing or falling flat—a dread that none of us ever quite relinquishes, but is exaggerated in ministry because of all our ‘chances’ to do so publicly.”

“Fear of giving to our family leftovers of our energy and emotions after sacrificing ourselves at the church office.”

“Fear of being damned falsely and having no viable recourse to rebut the slanderous rumors.”

“Fear that in trying so hard to be all things to all ‘my church people,’ I will fail to be much of anything real or substantive to any of them.”

“Fear that I will become so engulfed in human *doing* that I will lose touch with my human *being*.”

“Fear that in a profession committed to cultivating the *spiritual*, I have little right to seek *material* comfort, or conversely, that laboring tirelessly every year on boosting the budget (including my own salary) vitiates any authentic effort to help members ‘grow their souls.’”

“Fear of being either too erudite or too pedantic as a religious educator.”

“Fear of not quite knowing how to convey one’s faith in language understandable to a child or youth.”

“Fear of being so in love with abstract ideas that I grow out of touch with real people.”

“Fear of running out of worthwhile things to say or having ‘my faith’ suddenly go stale or dry up.”

“Fear of being a ‘sweetheart’ as a pastor, trying to win everyone’s approval but no one’s respect.”

“Fear of having labored for ‘naught’ or being considered ‘insignificant’ in the last analysis.” (Ibid, pgs. 32-33)

Whatever we do, whoever we are, I think recognizing our fears is a part of our healing process. And I think that a Religion

For Our Time, in order to help repair the world, must be sensitive to our common fears as human beings.

We are entering the holiday season with Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and the New Year. It is all meant to be a time of celebration and connection with family and friends. It is also a time, however, when, for many of us, the issue of money becomes prominent, for in the act of giving as much as we do, we often go into debt.

During a conversation that some of us had this past weekend with Peter Heinrichs and Susan Lewis, who are consultants that we might hire to help us as we proceed with expanding our mission and our physical space over the next couple of years, there was some discussion about the “fears surrounding the issue of money.” They noted that there is always fear and guilt around money, but that giving, including

that which is donated to a church to meet its mission in the world, is all about deep spiritual commitment. The real issue for us as a congregation has to do with *who we are*, and how we engage in the world to help transform it. The way the consultants put it is: “what is the heart song in our church”?

There is another beautiful expression in Hebrew, *tikkun olam*, which contributes to the rich insight of religious giving.

Tikkun Olam means “repairing the world.” (*Giving—the Sacred Art*, by Lauren Wright, pg. xvii)

It seems to me that *A Religion For Our Time* must not only face fears, but place peoples’ concerns and needs in a context that is all about spiritual giving and receiving.

Moreover, *A Religion For Our Time* must be in the business of transformation so as to “repair the world.” Fortunately, Unitarian Universalism is very much in concert with this understanding of its own mission.

In fact, a few years ago at General Assembly, both Riane Eisler and David Korten were invited to speak. Riane Eisler, best known for her courageous look at the history of domination models in her work, *The Chalice and the Blade*, also published, *The Real Wealth of Nations*—a play on Adam Smith’s 1776 work, *The Wealth of Nations*, which provided the foundation for our present economic system. And David Korten, known for his bestseller, *When Corporations Rule the World*, also published a work entitled, *The Great Turning, From Empire to Earth Community*.

Both speakers were convinced that we are at a threshold, a defining moment in our history. David Korten puts it this way: “By what name will our children and our children’s children call our time? Will they speak in anger and frustration of the time of the Great Unraveling, when profligate consumption led to an

accelerating wave of collapsing environmental systems, violent competition for what remained of the planet's resources....? Or will they look back in joyful celebration on the noble time of the Great Turning, when their forebears turned crisis into opportunity, embraced the higher-order potential of their human nature, learned to live in creative partnership with one another and the living Earth, and brought forth a new era of human possibility?" (Korten, "The Great Turning," Introduction)

Riane Eisler also puts it rather personally: "As I looked at my grandchildren, I couldn't help thinking of the millions of children in our world, all born with a hunger for life, love, and joy, condemned to untimely deaths or lives of unnecessary suffering. As I reflected on the pristine beauty of our oceans and the grandeur of the coastal cities where so many of us live, I thought of the threats from climate changes caused by current

economic rules and practices. As I took in the reality around me every day, I saw the stress of families vainly trying to find time for one another, and the pain of people displaced by new technologies that should have been used to improve our lives instead. And again, I came back to economics.” (Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, pg. 1)

A Religion For Our Time must deal with the fears surrounding money. But it must also be courageous enough to engage in and promote a transformational economics that transcends capitalism, communism, or other economic “isms.”

What we need is not the same old stuff; what we need is a different way of looking at the world, as well as working globally to meet all peoples’ needs so as to overcome peoples’ fears. What we need is an economic system that supports caring for all people, living beings, and the Earth. (Ibid., pg. 8)

The theme of care and caring in economics dominates both Riane Eisler's and David Korten's works. Eisler actually calls us to create a caring economics. She contends that the system that has existed for millennia is a domination system, in which "there are only two alternatives for relations: dominating or being dominated....Trust is scarce and tension is high, as the whole system is largely held together by fear and force." (Ibid., pg. 30)

What Eisler suggests instead is what she calls, "the *partnership system*." Such a system "supports mutually respectful and caring relations. While there are still hierarchies in order to get things done, the hierarchy in a partnership model is a hierarchy of actualization rather than a hierarchy of domination. In a hierarchy of actualization, accountability and respect flow both ways rather than just from the bottom up, and social and economic structures are set up so that there is input

from all levels.” Economic policies, then, are created to support “all peoples’ basic survival needs, our needs for community, creativity, meaning, and caring,” and the need, as well, to support and protect the earth which gives us life. (Ibid., pg. 31)

What Riane Eisler calls the domination model, David Korten calls the “relationships of Empire.” He actually contends that this a “social pathology that feeds a violent and self-destructive competition, suppresses creative potential, and promotes a grossly inefficient use of resources.” The golden rule for Empire is: “He who has the gold rules, so go for the gold and make sure you get more of it than your neighbor.” (Korten,

The Great Turning, pg. 35)

What Eisler calls a partnership model, Korten calls “Earth Community,” where “service, compassion, and cooperation are valued as essential social goods...and people learn that meaning and purpose are found in equitably sharing power and

resources” to promote the well-being of all. The golden rule of Earth Community, then, is: “Do unto your neighbor as you would have your neighbor do unto you as you work together to create a better life for all.” (Ibid., pg. 37)

What Eisler and Korten are promoting is *tikkun olam*—repairing the world. We Unitarian Universalists speak about putting our principles and values into practice—right relations, radical hospitality, care, compassion, love, equity, justice, and truth. These words, concepts, and principles cannot be vacuous, for our work, our ministry is all about connection and transformation.

Another word for this is stewardship, where stewardship is understood as serving the needs of all beings and all communities, while protecting the earth and providing equitably

the common resources that will serve generations to come. (Ibid., pg.

37)

In being compassionate, as it sees the world's fears and pain, A Religion For Our Time must be transformational, and must engage in a ministry of stewardship, with care as its foundation. And then, **then** we are talking about the sacred; **then** we are talking about the spiritual; **then** we are talking about the divine that resides within each and every one of us; **then** we are talking about serving life; **then** we are repairing the world.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.