

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE COMMON GOOD?
 MARTIN'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS—AND OURS
 Richard S. Gilbert – Albany, NY – January 12, 2014

The day was insufferably hot and humid, made more so as we were surrounded by a quarter of a million people. There was a large pool into which we could dip our feet to cool off, but other than that no relief from the merciless sun. I had gone to our nation's capital despite a warning from an influential member of my congregation it would be a controversial journey. A distant, booming, preacherly voice could be heard through loudspeakers, but the words were decipherable only through the portable radio we had with us. Nonetheless, August 28, 1963, is forever seared into my memory.

Fast forward to March 10, 1965. A clergy colleague had been brutally murdered by a racist gang on the streets of Selma and I flew south from Chicago for James Reeb's memorial service. Once again I heard that same commanding voice as Dr. King delivered the eulogy. We were surrounded by Alabama state troopers wielding four-foot long clubs, but I was embedded in a non-violent community which afforded protection. I had been pursuing a doctorate in social ethics, but that Browns Chapel event propelled me back into the parish ministry where the real action was. Just before the preacher entered the pulpit he brushed past my arm – our only personal encounter.

April 4, 1968. I was minister of our Ithaca congregation and a chaplain at Cornell. When the news of the Memphis assassination broke, the chaplains gathered quickly to determine how to minister to a racially tense and angry campus. I discovered that prophetic ministry has to be balanced by pastoral ministry. It was time to heal, first; then time to march.

November 10, 2013. Our Cortland congregation was celebrating its 150th anniversary and I was their guest speaker. I was moved to remind them this same preacher had addressed the New York State Convention of Universalists there in October 1956.

These autobiographical fragments bear witness to the power that one human being has to inspire another. Though we never exchanged a word, or a letter, Martin Luther King, Jr., has been a persistent presence in my life and ministry.

The history books tout King as a civil rights leader, and the nation celebrates that heritage on – or near – his birthday, January 15, 1929. It has become a fashionable holiday. However, we seldom hear about his controversial anti-Vietnam War speech on April 4, 1967, at New York City's Riverside Church. Nor does his involvement with the ill-fated 1968 Poor People's March in Washington, DC, garner much notice.

He was in Memphis to support the sanitation workers' demand for a living wage. Economic justice and civil rights were a seamless garment.

January 2014 provides four "teachable moments:" Governor Cuomo's State of the State message, President Obama's State of the Nation address, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 84th birthday, and the less well-noticed 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty.

The War on Poverty is a term seldom invoked by either of the major political parties. In fact, the black radio/TV personality Tavis Smiley notes that at the 2012 Republican National Convention there were only five mentions of poverty per 25,000 words; at the 2012 Democratic National Convention there were only three mentions of poverty per 25,000 words. President Obama has indicated that inequality would be the theme of his last three years in office. Presumably that will

be a theme in his upcoming "State of the Union" address. And now I hear Republican leaders daring to mention the need to end poverty. About time in both cases!

Our good Governor in Wednesday's rather timid State of the State address seemed enamored of greater equality in rhetoric but in policy – not so much. Our \$8 an hour minimum wage is better than the paltry \$7.25 federal level, and will increase to a whopping \$9 by 2016.

That, however, does not begin to make up for value lost to inflation, does not get a family to the poverty level, much less provide a living wage. But chances are slim to none he will push for acceleration of that policy. And that mystery wrapped in an enigma called the New York State Legislature seems poised to do – little or nothing about poverty or inequality.

I have more questions than answers about our predicament. These questions are more moral than economic. They are the questions that empty the room.

Whatever happened to the Common Good? Why does our nation persist in policies perpetuating inequality? Paradoxically, resistance to hiking the minimum wage seems to increase with wealth. Steve Forbes is adamantly opposed. Maybe we should consider a maximum wage. Despite Obamacare's modest effort to provide more health insurance, we witness unparalleled resistance without viable alternatives. Those who have exhausted their unemployment insurance are evidently just lazy. Without a trace of compassion we cut billions from the SNAP food assistance program while unashamedly defending extension of tax cuts for the wealthy. And, in this state, we bribe new companies to build here with tax-free zones.

Our nation is characterized by an individualism on steroids. But we are social creatures. We are an interdependent web. We celebrate King's "network of mutuality," the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community.

At a recent UUA General Assembly I saw a provocative T-shirt emblazoned with the words: "Unitarian Universalism: It's not all about you!" Transfer the "it's not all about you" from religion to politics and you have my critique of America Inc. Democracy is not all about "you;" it is all about "us." And as inheritors of the Universalist tradition, we know "us" takes in everyone.

A Pew Charitable Trust poll recently asked whether the government should take care of people who cannot take care of themselves: 75% of Democrats say yes, down from 79% in 1987; 40% of Republicans say yes, down from 62% in 1987.¹

I am reminded of the Talmudic story about two men who came into town and saw a house burning. One man prayed "I hope that's not my house." The other rebuked him, saying, "That's an unethical prayer." Whatever happened to the Common Good?

How much do we deserve? I mean morally, as people. We don't ask that question: the market is God. Our separation into the "haves" and "have nots" ignores too much. There are the "have too much," the "have enough," the "have too little" and the "have almost nothing."

In our "skyboxification of American life"² 600 individuals own as much wealth as the bottom 150 million of us. The rich have a morally corrupting superfluity; the middle class struggles up the down escalator; the scandal of poverty in the midst of plenty increases; we rank number 1 in spending on health care, but drop to the 30's in results; our environment is under threat from

none other than ourselves, the allure of hydrofracking in New York State being the most recent and controversial example.

There is demand for deregulating a financial industry which helped to grease the skids for the Great Recession, while Congress seeks to regulate its victims by cutting back on safety net programs. Corrupt hedge fund managers get a financial slap on the wrist; the long unemployed lose their insurance and poor children lose their food stamps. How do we distinguish "venture capitalism" from "vulture capitalism"?

Why is it easier to believe that 150 million Americans are "takers" – too lazy and happily dependent – than that 400 Americans are being greedy and manipulate the system for their own gain? Why does it create dependency if poor people receive public support in welfare, but not if they receive private charity?

96% of us have used government programs at some time or other – from the direct food stamp program for the poor to the indirect housing mortgage deduction for the middle class, to tax breaks for the wealthy, enabling them to pay taxes at a lower rate than many of the rest of us. Ask Warren Buffett if you question that. We are all both makers and takers, a reality which ought to focus our efforts on the Common Good.³

Campaign 2012 seemed more an auction than an election, and election 2014 will apparently be more of the same. But it seems to me that "If you can afford to buy an election, you can afford to pay higher taxes!"

We seem to be moving toward "government of the 1%, by the 1% and for the 1%," experiencing more of a "sucking up" than a "trickling down" of income and wealth. "What we need is a cure for greedlock."⁴

How much is enough? Americans pay the lowest federal tax rates in 50 years; 35,000 people with incomes over \$200,000 paid zero income taxes. The super rich are hiding at least \$21 trillion in overseas tax havens that would bring in \$220 billion at a 30% tax rate.⁵ We stumbled upon a corporate tax haven last summer on the Island of Jersey, UK, just off the coast of France. We had never seen so many luxury cars.

One New York State billionaire, albeit a generous philanthropist, moved to Florida for 51% of the year to avoid what he considered a burdensome property tax. Yet, he became a billionaire in "business-unfriendly" New York State. Go figure.

What do we do with the losers? We have not yet faced up to the moral implications of a competitive society which is structured to produce more goods with less people. More people are becoming economically redundant. Ours is a "winner take all" society with great rewards for winners and severe punishments for losers. Morally can we not moderate the rewards of success and mitigate the punishments of failure? Can we not invest in people so they may survive in an economy that seems hell-bent in profiting without them.

How do UU's fit into the picture? My friend and fellow UU Chuck Collins inherited considerable wealth from his family's Oscar Mayer Wiener company. After grappling with his conscience, he decided to give it away, much to his father's consternation—his father being a conservative libertarian. An interview with him in the UU World prompted this letter from a Arkansan UU businessman:

"Who does Collins think created that society and economic system? The answer is people like me. I haven't taken anything from the system; I have added to the system. Collins seems to be saying that I should be paying to participate in the system, that my adding to it isn't enough. I don't believe I owe the system anything. Collins asks why the huge gaps in income and wealth aren't more of an issue. The simple reason is that most folks think that if they made it, they should be able to keep it. They know that if they ever make it, they will want to keep it."⁶

As if in response, one politician had a ready response: "There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own – nobody.... Now look, you built a factory and turned it into something terrific or a great idea. God bless, keep a big hunk of it. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on the roads that the rest of us paid for. You hired workers that the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for.... Part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along."⁷

But that politician is virtually unique. Moral outrage is a rarity. Too many politicians are like weather vanes – they indicate only wind direction.

There is, as my colleague Bruce Southworth puts it, a "preferential option for the status quo." The Roman Catholic bishops advocated a "preferential option for the poor" in their powerful pastoral letter on economic justice in 1986. Now many seem preoccupied with protecting the faithful from contraceptive coverage, though the vast majority of the people in the pews want it. But the ray of hope is the new Pope who sounds to Rush Limbaugh like a socialist; to me he is a Christian who has read his bible. Or do we agree with libertarian Ayn Rand that "Capitalism and altruism are incompatible"?

What if we were assigned to create our society anew and did not know if we would be fortunate or unfortunate in the genetic and environmental draw – if we were to be successful or not? How would we then set the rules? Would we create a society with such vast discrepancies between success and failure? If we didn't know if we would be wealthy or on welfare, would it change our thinking?

What to do? First we must ask these hard questions and demand answers from our religious and our political leaders. They go to the moral heart of our economic system.

Part of the answer to those questions is found in a simple reading of the Preamble to the Constitution. Conservative politicians, the Supreme Court majority and the Constitution-loving Tea Party lean heavily on it. Let's look at this secular source through a theological lens: Note that the purpose of government summarized in the Preamble begins with "We the people," not "me the people."

Married to an English teacher for over 50 years, I pay particular attention to the verbs—they are active, not passive. We the people are not simply to allow justice to happen, but to "establish justice" through our covenant with each other. We are to "insure domestic tranquility," not merely wait for it to develop. We are to "provide for the general defense," though nowhere does it encourage us to launch wars in foreign countries. We are to "promote the general welfare," not passively wait for it to somehow transpire by the magic of the market. We are to "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity;" we bear a serious responsibility for future generations.

The replacement of the weak Articles of Confederation of 1787 by the assertive 1789 Constitution suggests to me the Founders wanted an activist government. That Preamble lays a heavy burden upon the citizen. Dr. King understood that; so must we, as we consider Martin's unfinished agenda.

That unfinished agenda is not hard to discern. Even while we engage in the great conversation about the long-range meaning of our nation, there are short term issues to be addressed. This congregation knows them well. If not, visit the Interfaith Impact display after the service. You have a well-deserved reputation for social responsibility.

As President of Interfaith Impact of New York State, with one breath I say "thank you," and with the next remind you of our unfinished agenda and say "please."

Martin Luther King often used the now-popular image: "The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice." Few realize that metaphor was originated by the 19th century Unitarian preacher/activist Theodore Parker in one of his *Ten Sermons on Religion*.

As much as I have quoted that remark, I believe it is both inaccurate and dangerous. It assumes that there is something inevitable about the triumph of justice. But there is nothing inevitable about it. It is more prescription than description; more hope than reality. It is far from automatic; it requires us to do the bending, and that is strenuous business.

Blind, romantic confidence in this felicitous phrase undermines the "hum drum work of democracy" to which we are called by Martin, who reminded us "human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability." He is no longer here to promote it, save by the inspiration of his life. That unfinished agenda falls right into our waiting laps, whether we want it or not. Martin exhorted us to be "drum majors for justice and righteousness." Are we even in the parade? Something dramatic happened at that 1963 March on Washington that I learned only recently. Singer Mahalia Jackson had given a rousing rendition of the song "How I Got Over." But Jackson did more than set the crowd up for King. When the beginning of his speech seemed rather flat, Jackson repeatedly said, "Martin, tell them about the dream." Without Jackson's prodding we might never have heard those now-famous lines.⁸

I leave you with the cartoon of two figures who met for discussion of our political predicament: One said to the other, "Oh, it's better to light one little candle, but I find it a lot more emotionally fulfilling to curse the darkness." Cursing the darkness, however, is not an acceptable Unitarian Universalist response to Martin's unfinished agenda.⁹