

Escalating Inequality November 16, 2014

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

*An imbalance between rich and poor
is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.*

– Plutarch

Sermon

Escalating Inequality

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

When I was in high school, I worked at the local movie theater selling tickets and concessions. When I was in college I worked at the movie theater near campus doing much the same kind of work. In each job, I earned the Massachusetts minimum wage: \$2.63 per hour, which, had I worked full time, would have amounted to \$5,470 a year – roughly the tuition plus rooming cost for one year at my college.

Adjusting for inflation, today that \$2.63 per hour would turn into \$16.25 per hour. If I were to work full time at those wages, I would be making \$33,800 a year. But we all know no state in the union has a minimum wage that even approaches \$16.25 per hour. The current Massachusetts minimum wage is \$8 per hour, which is \$16,640 annually, full-time. Attending my same college now costs 12 times what it did 40 years ago. In other words, a worker earning minimum wage in Massachusetts today has less than ½ the buying power I had back in those halcyon days of my youth.

I bring you those real-life figures because they reflect what has been happening all over this country in the last 40 years. Today, as we take up the topic of escalating inequality, we can look to my own lived experience to see how workers' compensation has eroded and financial struggles have escalated over the decades. A funny thing happened on the way to economic recovery and the prosperity our nation theoretically enjoys: Workers, for the most part, have been left out of it. That is an economic tragedy, certainly, and one many of us are feeling to varying degrees. But I maintain it is indicative of a spiritual

crisis as well.

UU congregations all over the nation are beginning to study the topic of escalating inequality in depth because this past June at General Assembly, the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association, delegates voted to adopt escalating inequality as our new Congregational Study Action Issue. To get us all on the same page, it's worth digressing for just a moment to explain what that means.

Every two years General Assembly votes on a topic for UU congregations to study for four years. The process starts with congregations submitting suggestions for Study Action Issues. Those suggestions are brought forward at GA for a vote.

Now if you're doing the math, you have already figured out that if we select a new 4-year topic every two years, we must be working on two topics at the same time. UU congregations are currently midway through a study of Reproductive Justice – a topic I preached about last year and will again later this year. In all honesty – other than my preaching about them – our congregation has not been terribly involved in Study Action Issues these last few years. We have been a bit preoccupied since our church fire in 2011. Study Action Issues landed on the back burner for a while. But now we are back. And, along with other UU congregations, we now take up the study of escalating inequality.

Why do we work on Study Action Issues? First, they usually result in a Statement of Conscience that guides the thinking and actions of our denomination. Congregations like ours – and the larger body of the UUA – can draw on statements of conscience on everything from immigration to ethical eating to creating peace to global warming to prison reform and more.

Second, the Study Action Issues are meant to lead, ultimately, to action – both action in changing the way we live our lives and action in the wider world. Our work on environmental issues, for example, has led to changes in the ways UUs live their lives

on many levels, from making environmentally responsible food choices, to consuming less, to the ways we provide heat and power to our homes and even our churches. For many, that work has inspired political action as well. So, coming back to our new Study Action Issue, escalating inequality, our study could lead to General Assembly voting to adopt a Statement of Conscience about escalating inequality. And our study will, hopefully, lead to action both within our own hearts and souls and in the wider world as well.

Why escalating inequality? Here is how the UUA frames it on their website:

Challenging extreme inequality is a moral imperative. The escalation of inequality undergirds so many injustices [that] our faith movement is committed to addressing: from economic injustice to mass incarceration; from migrant injustice to climate change; from sexual and gender injustice to attacks on voting rights.ⁱ

We have our work cut out for us over the next four years if we are to wrap our hands around such a large, complicated topic. Today I am focusing on escalating economic inequality to get the ball rolling.

In 2009 and 2010, students at the University of California began occupying campus buildings to protest budget cuts and tuition hikes that had come in the wake of the 2008 recession. Their protests capitalized on a fire in the belly for change, and they quickly spread. By September 2011, people were camped on at Wall Street, protesting the absurd concentration of wealth at the top of the pile in this country. “We are the 99%,” they chanted, protesting their discovery that 1% of the nation's population owned over 37% of its total wealth. Twenty percent of the nation's population owned almost 88% of the nation's total wealth in 2011.ⁱⁱ

The occupy movement spread all over the world, but, with time, withered away – partly because protests were shut down in many cities and mostly because the movement almost entirely lacked leadership. But since then, few have forgotten the startling

statistics. And it is my observation that anger still simmers just barely under the surface of the 99%.

No matter how you slice it, the yawning gap between rich and poor in this country grows steadily wider. In May 2014, the Gini index, which measures how far a nation's economy deviates from perfect equality, found the U.S. to have the fourth most uneven income distribution in the world, following Chile, Mexico, and Turkey and leading Israel. Those five countries, including the United States, are the five least equitable countries in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

For an example of the chasm between rich and poor here, take the Koch brothers, Charles and David, the top executives of Koch Industries, the second largest privately owned company in the U. S.^{iv} Each of the two Koch brothers earns 1.8 million dollars per hour. Minimum wage workers make roughly 7.75 per hour. Taken together, the Koch brothers earn 16.4 million dollars a day. A minimum wage worker makes 65.25 a day. To earn what the Koch brothers earn in one day, a minimum wage worker would have to labor for 690 years.^v

But things will always be unequal, you might say. And that is true. There is no way intelligence, good looks, luck, or wealth can be exactly evenly distributed among everyone.

Besides, one might say, all those rich people may own their private jets and fancy homes, but this is still a democracy. They don't own our elected government.

Oh wait.

This past election was dubbed by some as the election in which small donors were left behind.^{vi} Election spending inched toward 4 billion dollars, much of it on both sides coming from billionaires. The Koch brothers were planning to spend roughly \$300 million dollars on campaigns in states all over the nation.^{vii} And with that money comes

obligations. Now the same is true for liberal candidates who won. Their campaigns were also funded by billionaires, and those elected officials, too, will owe favors to the big money that elected them. The point is that our representatives no longer represent the people. Instead, they represent the big money that sees they are elected. And as that has become more and more the case, tax and labor laws have been changed to favor the wealthy, and education financing relief has been pushed aside.

Analyzing a recent study by Martin Gilens of Princeton University and Benjamin Page of Northwestern University, American University professor Allan J. Lichtman writes:

*The analysts found that when controlling for the power of economic elites and organized interest groups, the influence of ordinary Americans registers at a “non-significant, near-zero level.” The analysts further discovered that rich individuals and business-dominated interest groups dominate the policy-making process. The mass-based interest groups had minimal influence compared to the business-based interest groups. The study also **debunks** the notion that the policy preferences of business and the rich reflect the views of common citizens. [Emphasis added.] They found to the contrary that such preferences often sharply diverge and when they do, the economic elites and business interests almost always win and the ordinary Americans lose.* ^{viii}

Perhaps the tepid voter turnout around the nation – the lowest in 72 years – is no big mystery.^{ix} Why vote if your vote doesn't actually matter? Why bother even contacting your elected officials if their votes are already bought by big money?

The demise of democracy ought to be a matter of grave concern for Americans generally and for Unitarian Universalists specifically: The fifth principle of our prized Seven Principles is that we affirm and promote “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

You see Unitarian Universalist theologies about humanity are generally positive.

We tend to believe all voices are important. We tend to feel that the people, together, will make better decisions than tyrants or despots. That's why democracy is important to us: We honor what each human being contributes. Yet today we live with the soul-crushing reality that – as things are actually played out – most voices are irrelevant, most people are pushed to the side, and the size of your bank account determines the sway you will have.

Our current inequitable system is soul-destroying in a couple of other ways, too. On the one hand, it promotes both greed and envy, two of the deadly sins according to the Catholic church. (The others are wrath, sloth, pride, lust, and gluttony.)

Thomas Aquinas said greed is "a sin directly against one's neighbor, since one man cannot over-abound in external riches, without another man lacking them... it is a sin against God, inasmuch as man contemns things eternal for the sake of temporal things."^x In my view, sin is whatever damages or severs relationships – whether among human beings or between human beings and the rest of creation. When my covetousness for more and more and more leaves you in the dust, my relationship with you suffers. Your importance becomes diminished in my eyes. The relationship is damaged, with my greed at the heart of that sin.

Now, with such an imbalance of wealth, it would be normal to envy those who have so much. But, of envy, Thomas Aquinas said, "Envy... is contrary to charity, whence the soul derives its spiritual life. Charity rejoices in our neighbor's good; while envy grieves over it."^{xi} Again, broken relationship results when envy flourishes – a sin that eats at the heart of creation. Thus our current system places the soul of our nation and the souls of our people in a place of ill health, disease.

And last let me say something about despair – not one of the official deadly sins, but soul shattering nonetheless. Despair is on the rise... as families where both parents work – often at more than one job – lose homes or are evicted because they cannot afford rent. As our young people enter the work force carrying the crushing

debt of their exorbitantly priced educations. As children – some of them taught by teachers in this very church – go home to a car, or a tent, or a homeless shelter. (Try doing your homework in a tent.)

I see the people who come to our church seeking help – electricity turned off, oil tanks empty, cupboards bare, children to feed, medical problems put on hold because they can't afford the deductible or the cost of prescriptions. I can't help them very much – especially this church year, when the Minister's Discretionary Fund was unfunded in our deficit budget. A tiny band-aid here; a tiny band-aid there. There is no excuse for our culture to live that way. I worry that the magnitude of despair in our culture today may be crippling us from the very real work we need to undertake to bring about change.

Here is what I hope for in our study of escalating inequality: I hope for people to return to the not-so-simple concept of neighborliness, or what some would call “beloved community” – where the health of the whole depends on the well being of all the parts, and where hearts reach out to others in concern, in helpfulness, and in love.

And then (wrote Judy Chicago)^{xii}
And then all that has divided us will merge.
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind.
And then both men and women will be gentle.
And then both women and men will be strong.
And then no person will be subject to another's will.
And then all will be rich and free and varied.
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many.
And then all will share equally in the earth's abundance.
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old.
And then all will nourish the young.

And then all will cherish life's creatures.
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth.
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

May it be so.

Benediction

Go now in peace, strengthened by love.
May the light of justice guide your journey
May the courage of the ages bring the words of truth to your lips.
May dreams of a better world inspire the work of your hands.
May the spirit of love accompany you every step of the way.

i <http://www.uua.org/economic/escalatinginequality/>

ii http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement

iii "Countries with the Widest Gap Between Rich, Poor." Ashley C. Allen. *USA Today*. May 21, 2014.
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2014/05/21/rich-poor-widest-gap/9351639/>

iv http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koch_family

v "Billionaire Koch Brothers Hate the Minimum Wage, EXPOSED 2014."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLs9rYUePMU&list=PLQ9B-p5Q-YOMLq_C6M7tGhcq_vk2ovyVQ&index=7&t=4s

vi "Overall Spending Inches up in 2014: Megadonors Equip Outside Groups to Capture a Bigger Share of the Pie."
OpenSecrets.org Center for Responsive Politics, October 29, 2014. <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2014/10/overall-spending-inches-up-in-2014-megadonors-equip-outside-groups-to-capture-a-bigger-share-of-the-pie/>

vii "Koch Brothers Unveil New Strategy at Big Donor Retreat." *The Daily Beast*, June 13, 2014.
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/13/koch-brothers-make-climate-activists-new-target.html>

viii "A Study in Plutocracy: Rich American Wield Political Influence, the Rest of Us Don't," John Light. August 14, 2014.
In: Moyers and Company: Money and Politics. (<http://billmovers.com/2014/08/14/a-study-in-plutocracy-rich-americans-wield-political-influence-the-rest-of-us-dont/>)

ix http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/opinion/the-worst-voter-turnout-in-72-years.html?_r=0
"The Worst Voter Turnout in 72 Years." Editorial Board. *New York Times*. November 11, 2014.

x <http://deadlysins.com/sins/envy.html>

xi <http://www.deadlysins.com/sins/greed.html>

xii Reading 464 from *Singing the Living Tradition*. Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993. (Boston: Beacon Press.)