

The Root of All Evil

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

“Do you think you have PTSD?”, my therapist asked after I described my work documenting soldiers deploying to war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. My achievements far exceeded my expectations in life. I really didn’t have any. The work was my passion. My personal relations were where I stumbled.

A therapist became my light after realizing I had difficulty expressing my emotions. She helped me get in touch with my innermost feelings and gave me the tools to build structure in my relationships. It never occurred to me that I may have been traumatized.

Did I suffer emotional trauma from having an alcoholic father? I was bullied in school. My bully was shot and killed years later in a bar after harassing an older man. Digging even deeper, I wonder if it’s possible to suffer from emotional trauma inflicted on my ancestors from slavery?

Glued to the television, I witnessed the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald forty-eight hours after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Live news coverage captured the murder of the accused by Jack Ruby. Twelve years would pass before the public saw the Zapruder film, capturing the president’s death. How traumatic must those events have been to a ten-year-old whose people’s hopes and dreams rested on the young president?

His picture sat on the mantles of many African-American homes, along with Jesus Christ. Many black families’ only capital lay in the prayers they placed their faith in; which I believe is a strong argument for reparations, making amends to those held in bondage and forced labor.

As an adult, I had the resources to go to a therapist; resources I didn’t have growing up in public housing. I harbor no ill will toward anyone that reaps a hearty bounty from hard work. It is the maximization of profits by minimizing the cost of labor through the inhuman perversion of slavery I have a problem with. Thankfully, slavery is no longer legally protected anywhere in the world. Yet, the control and exploitation of one human being by another still remains.

This is my last time as a Worship Associate. I’ve peeled that onion. Without you, I could not have taken this journey. I will miss standing here and talking to you about myself and what I’ve witnessed in my life. The work that began with my therapist continued with you. And unlike my therapist, you paid me with your attentiveness. Priceless! You have to be comfortable in your own skin to bare your soul to strangers. It has been very cathartic. Sometimes you just need to forget what is gone, appreciate what still remains and look forward to what’s coming next.

I’m happy to share with you that I’ve rekindled an old flame. I’m looking forward to the possibilities it will bring. The fruits of my labor are the only capital I have to sustain my fortunate life. I pray that my family will be as happy.

***The Root of All Evil*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Whether or not you've read *The Ministry for the Future*, I'm pretty sure you recognize the scenarios described in our reading this morning. The fictional event referred to in the reading is a heat wave that kills perhaps 20 million people in India – all but a single individual survives a particular village and we follow his story throughout the narrative.

What's compelling about this fiction, of course, is that the scenario is all too real. We've experienced some unprecedented heat waves in the Pacific Northwest, toxic levels of smoke and air, wildfires that have swept through and killed entire populations in California and Hawaii. Unfortunately, it does not take great imagination to believe that a heat event could take 20 million lives... and if you're anything like me, you can feel entirely helpless in this "Great Turning." I use that term intentionally, a term used by Joanna Macy and David Korten to describe the shift we must undergo from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining, third revolution of human times, even though some pretty horrific disasters seem to be required for us to decide we want to change at all. The Great Turning sounds positive, whereas the alternative, I think, is just called Extinction.

So, this book begins with an Extinction event – the death of millions of people, but as you gather from the reading, it becomes an event that initiates a shift – implied in these words "For a while, therefore, it looked like the great heat wave would be like mass shootings in the United States..." – that language implies that it was temporarily like mass shootings, but not permanently. In retrospect, in the perspective of a future we've not yet experienced, this heat wave precipitates great change on the planet.

I'm not giving a spoiler alert on this sermon, because though you get the idea that somehow humanity survives in this science fiction story by Kim Stanley Robinson, it's still worth reading and there is much more to it than the ending. Besides, that Bill Gates called it a "scary but hopeful novel about climate change," kind of gives it away before you read it. Some of the scientific experiments that delay and interrupt a heating climate are fascinating and, for all I know, being undertaken as I speak. But it is the financial shift that compelled me to want to preach it this morning.

Money. Yep. It all comes down to money. Greed is how we're ruining the planet as I speak. Donald Trump's schemes to fraud banks with financial statements that inflated his wealth finally caught up to him in a New York court on Friday. The judge ordered him and his companies to pay \$355 million dollars. Although important, it will take a lot more than this kind of accountability to stop the greedy of the world from taking, taking, taking and the planet from dying, dying, dying. It will, as the novel highlights, require a shift in economy, or what we consider economy. As Ronnie pointed out, slavery, thank goodness, is no longer legally protected, but that doesn't mean that humans aren't still exploited for profit. Several times in the novel it was mentioned how central bankers are as close to rulers of the world as exist.

No wonder we feel helpless. Most of us are just trying to survive economically. We're just trying to live our lives, afford our housing, feed ourselves, hopefully put away some savings and function under this capitalist system. Opting out is difficult if not impossible, and so we cope as best we can. Although I would point back to a sermon member Eric LaBrant gave in August about capitalism for ideas about how to resist – a short reminder, 1. don't cross a picket line, 2. reframe the discussion, and 3. weigh your

values when you spend. Past sermons like his are available online through our website. I highly recommend you return to that one when you have the chance.

That's how I was able to listen to Rev. Duane Fickeisen's sermon from last week. Wow. I loved what he did with the wild and feral emotion of grief, and the danger it inflicts on us when we suppress it. When deep feelings go underground, they do not disappear, as Duane discussed, they move into the shadow parts of our being. "It does not rest there," he said, "but plots to remind us of its presence, both overtly and covertly."

Emotions are like that, and the feeling that many of us associate with money is... shame. Shame, according to researcher Brené Brown, is "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. We feel like something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection."

Why shame? Because we are surrounded by narratives that equate our worth with our bank account, and the myth – especially in America – that anyone, rich or poor, can achieve their dreams through hard work and determination. The truth is actually that among the major developed countries, the U.S. lags behind only Italy and the U.K. in the absence of economic mobility – that is, it's easier to achieve your dreams in Japan, Germany and Australia, than it is in the U.S. So, if we believe the myth and then can't achieve our dreams, we believe there must be something wrong with us- we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

This unequal society we live in also provides ample opportunity for feelings of shame in the enlightened rich, as well. Our society is unequal, and we know that the rich tend to get richer and the poor tend to get poorer. So if one is among the rich, feelings of shame might come from "something we've experienced, done, or failed to do" that makes us unworthy of connection. Hanging onto our wealth when there are people sleeping on the streets can cause feelings of guilt and shame.

Those in the "so called" middle class might feel shame from a perception of occupying both ends of the spectrum: Not enough money to achieve their dreams, but sufficient wealth to not be sleeping on the streets...

When deep feelings go underground, they do not disappear, Duane told us last week, they move into the shadow parts of our being. And shame needs three things to survive, according to Brené Brown, secrecy, silence, and judgment.

All this brings us to our second reading this morning, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, where they discuss this research which revealed that "people feel that 'materialism' somehow comes between them and the satisfaction of their social needs," and concluded that "they were 'deeply ambivalent about wealth and material gain.'"

To get at some reasons that Americans are 'deeply ambivalent about wealth and material gain,' in addition to what I've just explored about our false cultural narratives, I researched some quotes from ancient scripture that inform our cultural understandings.

The most familiar might be – well, at least the source of the title of my sermon – First Timothy chapter 6 verse 10 "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

Money isn't the root of all evil, but the love of money is. Or when Jesus was to have said in Matthew, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

I'm not going to unpack these quotes- because I am a very poor biblical scholar – just ask my professor of Hebrew Scripture at the University of Chicago – but also because I suspect many of us either don't have the background to understand these quotes in context, or we've been fed a background that informs our understanding, which may or may not be historically accurate.

In this research I also found it interesting that the Buddha was to have said "One is the path that leads to material wealth, the other is the path that leads to Nirvana." (Dhammapada 5:75) which totally sounds to this unscholarly theologian like "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

This is not new, this problem we have with the distribution of wealth and our ambivalence around money. From Hindu Scripture and text (Arthava Veda Samhita iii24-5) we have the saying that "Wealth accumulated through 100 hands should be distributed to 1000 hands." That's more like it.

And of course, as we're nearing the Annual Pledge Campaign, I had to look up the notion of tithing – the tradition of giving 10% of your income to the church – and found this from Jewish scripture, Leviticus (27:30, 32), "All the tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the trees, are the Lord's; they are holy to the Lord...All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes under the shepherd's staff, shall be holy to the Lord."

Somehow being "holy to the Lord" got translated to being given to the church. And while some churches I believe do have a pretty good track record of caring for their own, they might be exceptional, and/or it might come at a great cost. Corruption is pretty common. So is the demand for orthodoxy or adherence to particular creed. Churches can be among the institutions which could help distribute wealth but instead hoard it. Or they can demand a way of belonging that demands a giving up of one's authentic identity. Not this church, I truly believe, but these corruptions affect how much people are willing to trust this church or any church, I'm sure.

All this is to explain a deep ambivalence about material wealth and gain. This strange religious history, also, contributes to a particular allergy to talking about money in church. We – certainly unwittingly – uphold the principles of secrecy, silence, and judgment about money, and contribute to feelings of shame by our people.

This is perhaps a good time to mention that your board has called a congregational meeting for Sunday, March 17th – that's in a month. They're trying to break the shame cycle, the secrecy, silence and judgment about money and share with you details about the church budget. This form of transparency is what prevents corruption. You don't have to be a member to attend. It is primarily informational. The meeting will be held between services, I believe, so either stay late or come early that day – more details will certainly be forthcoming.

What I thought was interesting about the research that economist Richard Wilkinson did with Kate Pickett was that when people were brought together, they were surprised to learn their assumptions were wrong. They had believed that most Americans did not share their desire to move away from greed and excess, when in fact they did. They believed that it was a minority who sought a life centered

on values, community and family, when in fact the majority said that was what they were seeking. When brought together in focus groups, they were heartened to learn that others shared their values.

That is the strength of community. When we come out of our isolated states and speak to others, we learn when our assumptions were off and about all that we hold in common with others. In this community, we also value the differences we have from others – we celebrate our uniqueness and authenticity. We learn that we can belong and be who it is we are at our core. That’s a pretty important value.

But how do we turn around this love of money thing? This thing that makes the world go ‘round – and makes the world go ‘round in a particular way. How do we overcome this reluctance to talk about it? For surely, if we can’t talk about money, we can’t come close to overcoming capitalism- for profit private ownership - and here, I’m talking about unchallenged doctrines, collection of myths and legends and cultural assumptions that Eric outlined in August. How do we challenge these beliefs that are leading us to global disaster and extinction and locking us into a particular world order that favors the rich – which are few – and hurts the many?

Besides Eric’s suggestions that we 1. don’t cross a picket line, 2. reframe the discussion, and 3. weigh our values when we spend, let me offer that we must share, speak and withhold judgment. We bring the conversation out of the secrecy, silence and judgment that shames us into inaction. We need to recognize that our money woes are not from a character defect or a sign that we are broken, but simply that we are a part of a big and flawed system that must be changed for our own survival. That is what shifts in this science fiction story I began with – the financial systems of the world begin to change and consider not just short-term gains but the long-term sustainability of the planet itself. That’s how the world is saved. Okay, that and a lot of other science fiction-y or perhaps just science experiments for turning back the clock on climate change.

I do tend to process real disasters with a fair amount of fiction, usually in the form of older, not-critically acclaimed films. During the early days of the pandemic, I enjoyed watching the 1995 film, *Outbreak*, and the 2011 one, *Contagion*. During a recent ice storm and cold spell, when there were power outages, but we had electricity, I re-watched the utterly fictional and unrealistic 2004 movie, *The Day After Tomorrow*, which is about climate change. That’s the one where Dennis Quaid plays a climatologist warning the world of a superstorm that sets off natural disasters throughout the world, plunging New York City into a new Ice Age, where his son has survived in the public library by burning books. What’s delightful about the narrative – if you can withstand the tragedy - is that at the end, it is the Southern hemisphere who has all the power and has to deal with a flood of immigrants from the North, turning our current situation upside down.

In *The Ministry for the Future*, however, the pinpointing of our financial systems as the way out of global annihilation just rang true. It is easier in so many ways to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. So ending capitalism as a way to save the world rings true. And whenever truth shows up, I find hope. Where there is hope, there is life.