

## *Inequality & Sustainable Society*

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
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It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society  
—*Krishnamurti*

When you reap the harvest of your land,  
you are not to reap to the very edge of your field  
or gather the gleanings of your harvest.  
You must not strip your vineyard bare  
or gather its fallen grapes.  
Leave them for the poor and the foreign resident;  
I am Yahweh your God.  
—*Leviticus 19:9*

### **WELCOME**

**GATHERING SONG**      *Cuando El Pobre*      #1027

### **CHILDREN'S FOCUS**

We imagined ourselves as a living infographic, with about 100 people sitting on the left side of the sanctuary representing 100% of the global population. In other words, with a population of a bit over 7 billion, each person represented a bit more than 70 million. Then we had a portion of those 100 people stand to represent various characteristics of global humanity

1. Nationalities
  - a. 5% from US and Canada
  - b. 20% from China
  
2. Ages (Youth!)
  - a. 10% age 60 or over
  - b. 4% are 70 or over
  - c. 1% over 80
  
3. Religion
  - a. 1% Jewish
  - b. 15% Nonreligious
  - c. 33% Christian
  - d. 21% Muslim
  
4. Food
  - a. 50% have a reliable source of food
  - b. 13% severely undernourished

5. Air and Water
  - a. 17% no water in home or nearby source
  - b. 32% unhealthy air
  - c. 36% inadequate sewage
  
6. Money
  - a. 10% live on average of \$1 per day
  - b. 75% have \$4 per day
  
7. The past
  - a. 1% alive in the time of Buddha
  - b. 3% in the time of Jesus
  - c. 10% in time of Shakespeare
  - d. 34% 100 years ago
  - e. 100% today
  - f. 101% next year (add one person from other side of sanctuary)
  - g. Assuming some of these kids live to the year 2100, in their lifetime the global population will double (everyone on **both sides of the sanctuary = 200+**)

Source: *If the World were a Village*, by David. J. Smith

**CHILDREN'S CHOIR**

Dona Nobis Pacem

**READING**

"Invocation"

Angela Herrera [adapted]

Don't leave your broken heart at the door;  
 bring it to the altar of life.  
 Don't leave you anger behind;  
 If it has high standards  
 for the world needs vision.  
 Bring it all with you,  
 and your joy  
 and your passion.  
 Bring your loving,  
 and your courage  
 and your conviction.  
 Bring your need for healing,  
 and your power to heal.  
 There is work to do,  
 and you have all that you need to do it  
 right here in this room.

**SILENCE (3:00)**

**MESSAGE, Part 1**

There is within us a generous inclination, a desire to share and to co-create. An opening of self that feels so good.

I'm not suggesting that this is the only inclination within us. We also have a tendency to hoard...to pull back, to defend ourselves. We have a tendency to compete, and we've developed a lot of powerful tools to help us to do so. So we're both: competitive *and* connected.

We need one another...and at the same time, at some level, we may fear one another.

And still we grow. Our human population swells. The wealth of nations increases. And new democracies emerge year after year—entire nations aspiring to an expansive vision of liberty, equality, and justice for all.

Liberty, equality, justice. What these ideals mean in practice continues to unfold. The romantic view (promoted at the time of the American Revolution) the romantic view held that liberty and equality are inseparable. We cannot have one without the other.

But the implication of some recent political rhetoric is that liberty and equality are opposites. We have to choose one or the other. Liberty, in caricature, being the ability to do whatever the hell I want to do regardless of how it affects others. And equality being what the weak and lazy promote so that they can sponge off the strong. Have our ideals so degraded? Is there no nobler purpose to which we can aspire?

20th century philosopher of economic and political ethics, John Rawls, suggested that Liberty, Equality, and Justice could mean something if we had a system constructed by people who didn't know how they, personally, were going to fare within that system. That is, if you came into the world not knowing where you were going to be born, not knowing what resources your parents would have, not knowing what skills or deficits—what mental, physical, or demographic characteristics would shape you—in that case, what rules and structures would *you* put in place for society?

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Let's take a look at how things actually are—and consider whether the system as it stands is helping us to accomplish our American dreams and our ethical ideals.

Much of what I'm sharing today is based on data and argument from a book called *The Spirit Level*. [Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, available in the Bellingham Public Library]

Its thesis is simple: inequality hurts everyone.

Up to a certain point, material goods and wealth can make our lives better. But among the wealthy democracies of the world today, what do we see when we compare average per-person income against the frequency of common social problems? Nothing. There is no correlation. When we look at infant mortality, obesity, murder and incarceration rates, life expectancy, mental illness, addiction, and teen pregnancy ... as our average incomes go up, do these problems go up or down? Neither. Comparing country to country, if we look at social problems as a

function of average wealth, the results are all over the map. There is no correlation between average income and the typical measures of societal well-being.

But there's another way to look at ourselves: comparing societies not according to average income, but on a measure of equality.

If we just look at average income, the democracies of the developed world hover within a fairly small range of one another. But if instead we examine the differences in wealth between the top 20% and the bottom 20% within each country, then a clear and dramatic pattern emerges:

Societies with higher inequality have a disproportionate number of social problems. But here's the key point: it's not just that unequal societies have more poor people and therefore more poor people with problems. No. Unequal societies have more social dysfunction at every income level. Inequality hurts everyone.

Just as racial inequality is bad for whites, and gender inequality is bad for men, income inequality is bad for the rich, the middle class, the poor, and everyone along the line. This analysis is based on data collected by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (which is a group of 34 wealthy countries seeking to stimulate economic progress and world trade...not some radical lefty organization).

The same comparisons—when made within the 50 U.S. states—show the same results. Where there is higher inequality, there are proportionately higher rates of social dysfunction...not just for those at the bottom, but across the board.

Does it have to be like this? Has it always been? Well, no. From 1978-2005, the prison population in the U.S. quadrupled, with inequality and incarceration growing along the same path. And comparing the U.S. states, we see the same correlation: states with higher inequality are the ones with higher incarceration rates. Additionally, those states with the death penalty have much more income inequality than those without the death penalty.

Does it have to be this bad in order to serve as a deterrent to crime? I think not, because while American crime rates are somewhat higher, our incarceration rates are dramatically higher than comparable countries (for example 14 times higher than Japan).

So here's what this system does accomplish:

- It creates a perception of safety from the underclass
- The use of "their" threat to "us" serves as an effective political tool
- And it diverts attention from more serious, more destructive problems such as white-collar crime and systemic exploitation of the poor by the rich.

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Let's look at social mobility—a measurement of whether our income-level is predicted by our parents, or whether we tend to move up or down according to our own abilities. Well, in 1950, 15% of sons remained within the confines of their fathers' income level. Then we saw steady

improvement: across the 60s, 70s, and by 1980 it was down to only 10% stuck in their parents' income bracket. Then the trend dramatically reversed course, shooting up to over 20% in 1990 and over 30% by 2000. As inequality in the U.S. has changed over time, social dysfunction has risen and fallen in concert.

Social mobility also refers to the concentration of poor people within poor neighborhoods. And we see a high correlation here: in more equal societies the poor tend to be more integrated. In unequal societies, poverty tends to be densely concentrated. Which means, if you're poor, you not only have to deal with your own issues, you have to deal with the consequences of poverty that spill all over your neighborhood.

But inequality is bad for everyone—not just for those in poor neighborhoods. Our social stratification means longer average commuting times for everyone, more traffic accidents for everyone at every income level, more pollution, more crime for everyone, worse overall school performance affecting us all, poor nutrition in neighborhoods without grocery stores or buses—leading to shared health care costs that are very difficult to control.

Diabetes, hypertension, cancer, lung disease, heart disease, infant mortality and life expectancy...maybe our odds get better if we live in a place that spends more on health care? No. That doesn't seem to help.

But are the odds better for those who live in societies with greater income equality? Yes they are.

Is this just some socialist screed? No it's not. Different countries achieve equality in different ways. In Sweden, for example, people have a wide range of personal income but tax and social policies redistribute that income substantially. In Japan, however, the government does comparatively little in this area, and yet Japan is the most economically equal of all the wealthy democracies because there is comparatively little variation in people's salaries. And this shows in their quality of life.

So please don't reject what I'm saying because it points to a particular political solution. It doesn't. And don't reject what I'm saying because we're not supposed to talk about this kind of thing in church.

Within the first few books of the Hebrew bible we find law after law about how we should be with one another in terms of material well-being. In Leviticus the command is given: do not glean to the edges of your field, but leave behind some for those without a field. The same command is repeated almost verbatim four chapters later, and repeated again in the next book, Deuteronomy.

Moving through Hebrew scripture we get to the Book of Ruth, the story of an isolated foreigner. Rather than running her out, the landowner orders his workers to make sure she gets what she needs...then goes further: so as not to compromise her dignity, he has some grain pulled out of each bundle in the field and tossed aside so Ruth won't even know that she's benefiting from someone's charity.

The message of scripture is incessant on this theme. The Hebrew prophets channel Yahweh saying, “I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. ...Away with your noisy hymns of praise! How much more strongly can I say it: love mercy, and do justice!”

The theme is repeated of course in Christian scripture. In the letter of James it’s written: Do not rely on good wishes or good words for one another. If your brother and sister are without food and clothing, get them what they need. Faith without works is dead.

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I criticize the Catholic Church from time to time because these are my roots and because we need to hold those with power accountable for the way that power is used. Today I will balance my criticism with kudos because the Catholic teaching on preferential treatment of the poor is fundamental to who I am. It’s not uniquely Catholic, of course, but it’s well articulated in 20th century liberation theology, and has been an important theme to Pope Francis.

Grounded in the wide sweep of history, in which oppression occurs again and again, with the strong accumulating riches, generation after generation, in such a way that they soon control the lives of the weak. The privileged accumulating privilege exponentially and ultimately hurting everyone.

I’m not going to pretend that I’ve ever been oppressed. I am a straight white man of privilege with smooth hands. The biggest thing I’ve ever had to carry was one of my fancy words. But if that’s the best I can do then let me get short of breath using my words. **INEQUALITY HURTS EVERYONE.**

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Does inequality swing like a pendulum, back and forth over time between the extremes? Or do unequal societies eventually self-destruct? I won’t try to predict. But if our eyes are open we cannot help but see the self-perpetuating nature of wealth accumulation.

We pretend to value meritocracy—a system in which we compete on a level playing field. But economic reality is described better by the cartoon in which a pin-striped cigar-smoking father says to his prim child sitting in his lap: “It goes in cycles, Junior. Sometime the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Sometimes, the rich get richer and the poor stay the same.”

Let’s accept for a moment that some inequality is inevitable. Even Jesus said it: “The poor will be with you always.” Does that mean that whatever happens is OK? Do we accept any level of inequality, no matter how absurd?

Do you remember the glorious 1950s? In that decade American CEOs took home an average of 25-30 times as much as their typical employee. Thirty years later, in 1980 it had grown a little bit: to 40 times. In 1990, 100 times. By 2007, when we were riding high on policies of unlimited possibility (just before the crash) CEO packages were 350 times what a typical worker earned.

And how, in the meantime, has our social contract fared? What has changed about the way we see each other and feel about each other? Surveys have asked whether people think their neighbors can be trusted. Is there more trust in richer countries? No. Is there more trust in poorer countries? No. Is there more trust in the more equal countries? Yes.

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Some would have you believe that how it is...is how it has to be. This must be the only way the system can work. Inequality is natural. Even Darwin affirmed “survival of the fittest” so obviously ravenous merciless competition is the only way forward, right?

But “survival of the fittest” is another caricature, and a dull one. (Besides, Darwin never said it.) Yes, competition has played a vital part in both biological and cultural evolution. But to suggest that dog-eat-dog is nature’s only way is to miss out on many of nature’s greatest wonders.

Consider Darwin’s description of a tangled bank. Imagine with me what he saw in that tangled bank “...clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth.” This entire complex web having evolved not just through competition but through symbiosis, symbiogenesis, biological mutualism, and countless other interdependencies.

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Competition is not bad. But we all know: competing for status requires keen attention to status. We need to be constantly on the alert and tuned in to judge between winnable and un-winnable conflicts. And when we have nothing to fall back upon, there is a great temptation to kick the dog or take it out on someone else lower than ourselves.

Humans evolved to be attuned to status. We also seem very attuned to unfairness, even as young kids we have an intuition about unfairness, to the point that we feel indignant even when it happens to someone else. And we might intervene even at a cost to ourselves.

But if you cannot fight against unfairness, either that done to you, or that which you see all around, it causes stress. Personal stress, family stress, neighborhood stress, and stress in the larger society.

So we just compete harder; we work longer hours (we have less vacation than people who live in more equal societies). We eat more, shop more, and produce more garbage.

For thousands of years humans have struggled just to have the basics in life. Our path forward was the path of growth. To get what we needed, we needed more. Well, we’ve done phenomenally well at getting more. Which brings us now to a more difficult question: not about HOW to grow, but what do we do when we find that growing doesn’t suffice? And more isn’t enough?

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

I'm not suggesting that we replace the competitive marketplace with soviet-style central planning. The collapse of that empire, and China's shifting economic structure too, tell us vividly that we can't overcome the problem of too much power in private hands by concentrating all of the power in the State. State power too can be inefficient, corrupt, and based in the denial of human rights. But this doesn't mean there are no alternatives to corporate plutocracy.

There are alternatives. In the 20 largest US cities almost 40 percent of the 200 largest enterprises are non-profit organizations like universities and medical institutions. 2,000 municipal electric utilities supply 40 million Americans with electricity—providing energy which is significantly cheaper because they're not making a profit for shareholders. 4,000 community development corporations create local business initiatives including low-income housing. There are 48,000 coops in the US, with 120 million members. 10,000 credit unions with assets totaling \$600 billion provide financial services for 83 million Americans. 1,000 mutual insurance companies are owned by their policy holders; 30% of American farm products are marketed through cooperatives. There are alternatives to monopoly-driven capitalism.

We have created a variety of viable forms of social organization, and an interdependent international economy requires this variety. We need an economically diverse tangled bank rather than a single beast to which we have to feed our very souls...lest in its death throes it takes us all down with it.

On Tuesday the Pickford Film Center will show "This Changes Everything," a film based on a book by Naomi Klein which has the premise: climate change will be awful AND it will be the wake up call that we've needed to finally change our global economic paradigm.

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Last week I attended the annual meeting of the interfaith coalition, a marvelous group who provide housing to the homeless, food to the hungry, and temporary overnight shelter when it gets really cold outside. I was truly impressed with the hands-on practical good work that this group accomplishes week after week.

It being an annual meeting of course some of the conversation was about budgets and dreams for doing more.

A few days earlier I had been to an event to promote CC+, BUF's capital campaign to pay down our mortgage so that we too can work on larger long-term dreams.

In all of these cases we're talking about the children of our children... whoever they may be, those 14 billion souls who will need to inherit a just economic system in order to bring their best selves to this world.

Let's imagine then the society we'd put in place for them if we did not know who was going to end up on the top or the bottom. Let's imagine that world, and let's go build it.

**SENDING SONG**

*We are not Our Own #317*