

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
“The Turning Point”  
Rev. Sam Trumbore September 30, 2007

Sermon

At our Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly this past June, publisher of “Yes! A Journal for Positive Futures,” and co-founder of the Positive Futures Network, Dr. David Korten, proclaimed, “The Day of Reckoning has arrived.”

Korten worked on international development projects through business, academic and non-governmental organizations for more than thirty-five years. During those years, he noticed the developed nation aid work often didn't help developing nations but rather facilitated their exploitation and the expropriation of their resources. He recognized the organizations with which he worked were really building empires, what used to be called “colonialism.” Even though Korten won international recognition for his work in Asia, it bothered him to be part of a system that was creating vulnerability and dependence in the indigenous population. The rising tide was clearly not floating all boats.

So Korten started working with public interest, citizen action groups to be part of an economic, political and social revolution that has evolved into what is now being called, “The Great Turning.”

I'm bringing this back to you from General Assembly because I see the opportunity for a “Great Turning” right here, that offers us a vision of an alternative to empire building. The crises of today are putting us at a critical turning point in world civilization. Many of us very concerned about the potential troubles ahead as we see the end of cheap oil, depletion of water resources and topsoil, predicted global climate change and ecological degradation everywhere around the world. These resource crises, well guided, could set the groundwork for positive directions that drive world civilization from the reign of empire to a collaborative “earth community.” Not only do I see the opportunity for “earth community” growing here, I also see Unitarian Universalists leading the way.

Key to facilitating this transformation, Korten believes, is changing our stories. He writes, “Those who control the stories that define the culture of a society control its politics and its economy.” (Korten, *The Great Turning*, p. 237) It is those stories I wish to address today because turning away from exploitation and expropriation will require a change of thinking.

Beliefs we hold about the world that guide our social policy, and individual choices and actions, what we accept and what we reject, are grounded in the mythology of our foundational stories. The room fell silent at General Assembly as Korten told the three key stories that shape American empire, the Imperial Prosperity Story, the Imperial Security Story and the Imperial Meaning Story.

The Imperialist Prosperity Story is easily recognized. The good life we all desire is created through economic growth that facilitates increasing consumption. That growth happens when those who have resources are allowed to freely use those resources in the pursuit of wealth creation. Anything that helps this process (like free markets, abundant and unlimited labor, material and capital) has wide benefit. Anything that interferes with investment and profit (like taxes, regulation, trade barriers and unions) harms the society by undermining the willingness of the self-interested person to invest. Without those willing to invest, the market will not work properly, so investor interests must be protected because everyone is a potential investor. Everyone has resources (such as intelligence, assets and skills) to invest so everyone can reap profits. Willingness to take greater risk is the rationale for greater reward. Yet unwillingness to take risk is a sign of personal weakness and character defect. Inequality of wealth is a natural outcome of the courage to risk and invest. Creating more wealthy investors benefits everyone because ideally everyone becomes a wealthy investor -- except the lazy dead beats unwilling to invest themselves or take risks.

This Imperialist Prosperity Story is reinforced every morning we open the newspaper and every night we watch the news as the well-being of our nation is measured materially by the percent growth of Gross Domestic Product, the movements of the stock market and all those economic indicators. Whatever American's profess in worship, the religion they practice on a daily basis is this Prosperity Story. In fact, many religious organizations conflate them together into a prosperity religion making wealth a sign of righteousness.

Because the Imperialist Prosperity Story has an assumed gap between the deserving rich and the jealous undeserving poor, there also needs to be an Imperialist Security Story. This story asserts the need for security to protect the righteous wealthy elite from the evil cabal who hate the rich because they're successful, free and blessed by God. Thus we need police and armies to keep the undeserving poor in line. This disordered rabble, whether the lazy poor asking for handouts and unwilling to play by capitalistic rules and work their way up from rags to riches or the evil terrorists bent on destroying the wealthy elite's way of life, both will always be with us. They must be kept in a state of fear and awe of the powerful through violence, imprisonment or execution.

Watching mercurial market movements and scenes of crime and poverty on television creates lots of anxiety and doubt, so the Imperialist Prosperity story and the Imperialist Security Story need to be backed up with a rationalizing Imperialist Meaning Story. There are two different versions, Korten argues, one Biblically based and the other secular. Both reinforce the first two stories.

The Biblically based Imperialist Meaning Story justifies inequality here on earth because this mortal coil is just a way station on the way to heaven where all will receive their just eternal reward or punishment. Our responsibility here on earth is to be pious and obedient and play the cards we're dealt. God has chosen who will be rich and who will be poor so accept your lot. The natural hierarchy starts with God who directs the rulers, rulers direct their subjects, men rule women, whites rule other races, and humanity rules over nature at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Here is the atheist version: All that exists is matter and energy and we are the result of random forces that have no ultimate purpose. Consciousness and free will are illusions. Since life has no intrinsic meaning, the rational course of action is to seek meaning through the accumulation of wealth and power. The survival of the fittest individual drives that process. The victor in the competitive struggle for wealth and power has the natural right to rule. Darwinian selection, harsh as it may seem, serves the best interest of the evolution of the species, (and why so many of us carry Genghis Khan's genes.)

These Imperial stories have produced a violent and depleted planet and an American society that is divided, competitive and spiritually sick. It doesn't have to be this way and we can do something about it. What we can do learn how to forge partnerships, partnerships between the people feeling the worst of the oppression and those who may be better off, to work together to end oppression and build a genuine community. Crossing the false barriers that separate us, forging a link between our own liberation and the changing of oppressive laws and systems, is something that Donna Jones understands. She spoke at last week's forum about ARISE's upcoming action meeting, and I was moved by the spirit and insight of her words. I've invited her back to speak to you now, so you can hear her story and her powerful challenge to the Imperial stories in her own words.

(Donna speaks)

What the Imperialist Prosperity Story ignores is the inherent value of the diversity of life on this planet that has a legitimate claim NOT to be seen as resources solely for human exploitation and expropriation. What the Imperialist Security Story ignores is

the life affirming potential of the creative energy of the poor and the marginalized. What the Imperialist Meaning Story ignores is the inherent worth and dignity of all living beings.

There is an alternative story that Korten presented to us at General Assembly, where prosperity is measured by the quality of people's lives. This story defends the need of the ecosystem, the golden goose of all material wealth, to flourish in balance with human demands upon its resources. Security is maintained through strong families and communities that build relationships of mutual trust and caring. Renouncing violence and sharing equitably the resources of the world in a sustainable way can best establish world security. Finally, the foundation for prosperity and security comes from having a life-centered spiritual foundation rather than a material foundation for meaning. This life-centered foundation is fundamentally co-creative and generative, and favors democracy and egalitarianism over dominance and submission.

We can enact this vision of Earth Community right here. One important and immediate way to do so is to partner with Donna in her fight to improve schools and justice systems. We can do that by continuing to support and strengthen ARISE.

A Regional Initiative Supporting Empowerment formed seven years ago brought together 35 religious organizations and neighborhood groups in the Capital Region to fight for the concerns of the marginalized. Whatever the faith background of the members of ARISE, we all share a common belief that our public policy should have a spiritual foundation that honors the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Our public policy should serve people and build our community rather than be driven by materialistic values that dehumanize us.

Public policy in Albany, Schenectady and Troy over the last several hundred years has consistently dehumanized African Americans in our community.

- ARISE wants to see this reversed because the member congregations recognize this violates their spiritual and moral values.
- ARISE wants to see the disadvantaged arise through Liberty Partnerships with tutors who help students break out of the cycle of self-doubt and self-hatred and build their self-worth that encourages them to go to college and create a more meaningful life for themselves.
- ARISE wants jobs that come from the convention center to be built in Albany to benefit the people here, particularly minority contractors and apprentices who need a chance at those construction jobs that will their build skills that will lead to other good paying construction jobs.
- ARISE wants to see reform of the criminal justice system to prevent troubled youth from being doomed to a lifetime of incarceration.

The last, very exciting initiative ARISE is working on, I'll mention, is partnering with Paul Tonko, now leading the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to create, using minority apprentice contractors, an inner city renovation and rehabilitation program to make low income housing more energy efficient. This program could advance both our congregation's social and environmental values that will benefit everyone.

ARISE's power to negotiate these initiatives comes from strength in numbers. I am proud to say that in 2001 when I served as President of ARISE, this congregation set a record for one group's attendance at an ARISE action meeting with 118 UUs. ARISE's influence was small initially but has grown and with allies now in the Governor's office, ARISE has a golden opportunity to see significant progress on our issues. ARISE needs you to support these issues with your whole body. I urge you to devote just one evening each year attending ARISE's public meeting as a powerful way to support the good work of ARISE. The insert in your order of service has all the details of how to get the church in Troy where the meeting will be held. Please join me in partnering with Donna Jones to create an earth friendly community of justice and peace.

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