

from “One Party Planet” a pamphlet published by www.therules.org

Our current economic/political system is based on “three deep beliefs: firstly, that survival of the fittest through eternal competition between self-interested parties is...the only law upon which human society can realistically be ordered; secondly, that...financial wealth equates with life success which equates with virtue; and thirdly that man is...answerable only to himself, his peers and, possibly, his God, in that order.”

And yet, “Confucius, Lao Tze, Socrates,...Buddha,...Marcus Aurelius, Jesus..., the Prophet Mohammed, ...Rumi, ... Eleanor Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi,... Nelson Mandela, and even young Malala...all taught the opposite...of permanent competition, of valuing life by a person's financial wealth, and of isolated protectionism. They all taught [that] humility above pride, compassion above self-interest and relationships...based on empathy, not competition...[was] the key, not only to individual happiness, but also to social harmony.”

“How Much Do We Deserve?” by John Buehrens, Minister, First Parish in Needham, MA (2005)

At a glitzy mall, just before Christmas, in the midst of the crowd of shoppers heavily laden with purchases, I saw a teenager bopping along, listening to his CD player, wearing a T-shirt inscribed, “ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT NARCISSISM!”

That is the spiritual ailment of our age you know: the sense that all that matters is what I feel, or want, or think I deserve. Then, driving home, I found myself listening to a new CD – by “Sweet Honey in the Rock,” those amazing African-American women, one of whom is an active Unitarian Universalist. “I been thinkin’ ‘bout how to talk about greed,” they were singing. “Greed moves like a virus seeking out everyone....Nothing seems to stop it once it enters your soul....Greed driven people created slavery....Greed is so sneaky, hard to detect in myself; I see it so clearly in everybody else.”

In June 2000, delegates at our General Assembly voted to adopt a statement beginning, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, hereby rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of economic justice, an end to racism, and an end to poverty.” But it’s one thing to talk about the economic issues, and another thing entirely to live them.

We want to be good, but it is hard not to be sorrowful in the face of advice to share one’s many possessions with those who have little or nothing. As children’s writer Shel Silverstein said in verse:

I’ll share your toys, I’ll share your money
I’ll share your toast, I’ll share your honey,
I’ll share your milk and your cookies, too.
The hard part’s sharing mine with you.

Globally, we are six billion people now on this planet. According to the UN, at least two billion live on \$2 a day or less. Two-thirds of those live on less than one dollar a day.

We know that we have an obligation to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly enough to empower others to develop their full human, spiritual and moral potential. But we’re

afraid. Afraid that we don't know how, perhaps. But also afraid to let go of what makes us feel safe. So many of us fall back on the spiritual temptation to say that whatever we have, we deserve. Because we earned it. As though no one else played a role. Not our parents, teachers, colleagues, friends, or mentors. Not those who work for less than we do. Not anyone or anything. Then I can hear my mother repeating what she once said on meeting the late Sen. Joe McCarthy: "Hm! Another self-made man who worships his creator!"

How much *do* we deserve? In a brilliant book with the same title as this sermon, the Rev. Richard Gilbert suggests some principles for distributive justice. He quotes what the Catholic bishops wrote to their people in the 1986 pastoral letter, "Distributive justice...calls for the establishment of a floor of material well-being on which all can stand. This is a duty of the whole of society, and it creates particular obligations for those with greater resources. This duty calls into question extreme inequalities of income and consumption when so many lack basic necessities. Catholic social teaching does not maintain that a flat, arithmetic equality of income and wealth is a demand of justice, but it does challenge economic arrangements that leave large numbers of people impoverished. Further, it sees extreme inequality as a threat to the solidarity of the human community, for great disparities lead to deep social divisions and conflicts."

What does *our* conscience say?

Our political and economic views and circumstances will vary. But a shared religious view of economic justice, I believe, should not rest on the political, or even the ethical level. It has to go deeper. It has to ask the underlying spiritual question. What blocks us from empathy with the suffering and deprivation of others? What keeps us from feeling solidarity with other people's struggles for justice? What keeps our society, in all its abundance, in such a state of "moral underdevelopment," as the bishops call it?

You see, only you, and you, and you, and I, together can prevent narcissism, can prevent a culture of narcissistic self-involvement from sapping our souls. Only we together can learn to talk about greed. To see it not just out there in others, but in ourselves here as well. To support, not an ideology, but a spirituality that moves toward economic justice. Through more responsible consumption. Through the real empathy that must precede and support all effective public policies. In the United States, those policies might include a higher minimum wage, affordable housing, health insurance and child-care to help low-income families, and debt reduction for the world's poorest countries.

Asking how much I deserve keeps me trapped in my narcissism. Looking around me, however, I'm kept mindful of the needs of others, I count my many blessings. I remember how often I've been allowed to drink at wells that I did not dig. And I discover again that deeper part of my soul that is both generous and courageous for justice.