

Economic Justice: The Fear of Limits is the Beginning of Wisdom

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In the summer of 1955, when I was in college, I went to Europe for the first time with a group of friends from LRY, our new Unitarian Universalist youth organization. In Geneva, Switzerland, I took part in an international youth conference sponsored by the United Nations on "the peaceful uses of atomic energy." I saw a model of something I didn't know existed, an electricity-generating nuclear reactor. This, we were told, was the future of electric power, worldwide. Nuclear-generated electricity would be abundant, inexpensive, non-polluting, inexhaustible in supply. This was long before Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, before the recognition that we had no safe place to put a permanently radioactive nuclear dump. Well, of course, the last chapter on nuclear power is not written yet. But never again will we rush into its arms with the same utopian naivete. The fear of limits is the beginning of wisdom.

My title echoes these consciousness-shaping biblical words: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; see also Proverbs 1:7). Here's incidental information on an old convention in Bible translations: Where LORD appears in all caps, the Hebrew text says "Yahweh," the sacred name of the God of the Jews who is traditionally understood as one and universal. (Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that Unitarians are people who believe in, at most, one God.)

"Lord" nicely alliterates with "limits." More significantly, the very idea of God signifies the recognition of "limits," or a "sacred limit," a limit that cannot be violated without violating, degrading, and finally dehumanizing ourselves. That's what the word "sacred" means to me. The hymn we sang -- from our old *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* -- has this verse:

Consecrating art and song,
holy book and pilgrim track,
Hurling floods of tyrant wrong
from the sacred limit back.

Perhaps you can explain to me why the tender-minded editors of our new hymnal changed just those lines of the famous Unitarian hymn-writer, Sam Johnson. I don't imagine they would have liked the word "fear," either. But let me translate: "Fear of the LORD" means, at least, due respect for something greater than ourselves.

One of the six great "Sources" of our free faith is "words and deeds of prophetic women and men" -- in every age and nation -- "which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." Strong words those, words reflecting our ideal of the prophetic church. James Luther Adams said the prophetic liberal church is that community which "deliberates and decides those things that are of ultimate concern and social concern to persons of free faith." That, friends, is what we are doing at our general assemblies when we pass resolutions of social witness -- such as the 1999 study and action resolution titled "Responsible Consumption as a Moral Imperative." It begins with these words:

"Irresponsible consumption endangers our future as it wastes raw materials and precious resources, depriving people in other countries as well as our own future generations. Can Unitarian Universalists and their congregations influence people to become more responsible in our consumption of resources?"

Today in our Social Action Forum, we are deliberating this matter of ultimate and social concern to persons of free faith. New awareness and new decisions about how we shall live, individually and together, will follow from this discussion. New limits to our patterns of personal and familial consumption will begin to emerge. And what institutional decisions regarding our own church might emerge -- for instance, regarding the design of our new building for responsible energy conservation and consumption?

The resolution and the forum are asking us to think globally and act locally. I am asking you to think economically and to act intelligently. First, think economically: The word "economy" originally referred precisely to the management of the household -- something as simple and basic and universal as that -- and a good place to return to when we come to ask ourselves, *How much is enough? What do I need for the well-being of my household, and what do my neighbors need for their households?*

Second, act intelligently, knowing, for instance, that every exponential growth curve must level off, or else it reaches an absolute limit, the point where it breaks off and falls precipitously. Recognize, then, the illusions of economic boosterism: the myths of limitless natural resources, limitless economic development, limitless prices on new technology and Internet stocks, limitless growth of the American economy (keeping us forever a jump ahead of everybody else in the world), limitless human happiness through accumulation of high-priced toys and beachfront properties, limitless petroleum, limitless genetic manipulation, etc. These are deeply seductive myths, for we would like to believe in all of them, although in sober moments, our "fear of the LORD" moments, we know they will betray us.

Here are a few of the many sobering questions about "responsible consumption" that the UUA study guide to our proposed resolution of social witness raises: "How can we harness our individual and collective purchasing power to encourage the sale of ecologically friendly and energy-efficient services? Can the Unitarian Universalist commitment to equity and justice for all be achieved by carefully challenging the level of our own consumption? Why does the government subsidize new suburban housing

developments with road and sewer construction that destroy farmland and open spaces when inner-city neighborhoods need to be rebuilt?"

Barbara's car has a sobering "fear of the limits" bumper sticker that we got at a county fair between sprawling Washington, D.C., and sprawling Charlottesville, Va: "Farmland Lost Is Farmland Lost Forever."

Advocates of free market economics have held out the promise of continuous growth as the sure and painless solution to poverty and the equitable distribution of wealth. An ad placed by the Mobil Oil Co. (this was before it joined forces with Exxon) asserted, "Growth is the only way America will ever reduce poverty. While the relative share of income that poor people get seems to be frozen, their incomes do keep pace with the economy." That is, relatively speaking, they seem to be no worse off. After all the cynical quips -- "We had a war on poverty and poverty won" -- the truth must be told: Education and civil rights, Medicare and other social welfare programs have been major contributors to overcoming poverty in America, starved for resources as these programs have been.

Meanwhile, income disparities have been growing at an alarming rate, encouraging ever-greater displays of conspicuous consumption for some. It is no wonder that homelessness defines a new underclass in America. The tide of prosperity raises all ships, they assure us, hoping we don't notice how many ships simply sink.

Yet the message of Republicans and Democrats is essentially the same: *Vote for us! We can deliver continuous and ever-growing prosperity to your door. We will keep the economy growing as never before -- continuous and limitless growth.* If they promised anything less, would anybody vote for them? Would we? Speaking of "limits" -- speed limits -- Jimmy Carter asked us to drive 55 and stay alive, and look what gratitude it got him!

Now our whole political system seems focused on one question: How to extend the length of our already unprecedented "economic expansion"? The more we produce, the richer we will be; the richer we are, the more we will spend, the more we will consume, the ... What comes next in this mantra of limitless growth -- "the happier we will be"? We will not seriously address the problems of wasting natural resources and degrading the environment until we do two things: First, affirm a personal ethic in which the bywords are "enough," "sustainability," "simplicity" and "honoring the real." And second, question the assumptions of our dominant economic ideology that limitless growth is possible and desirable.

We Americans say (as a political and ethical belief) that all persons are created equal, but we pursue an economic system that creates immense disparities in income (more so than virtually any other society on Earth). Is it any wonder we also generate the highest rates of crime? But with classical economics, these questions are non-economic. They belong to some other field of study. For economics, efficiency and equality are simply "the great

trade-off." Any scheme for income redistribution is counted an "inefficiency" because it rewards non-production.

Consider the question of worker mobility: On classical economic assumptions, the ability to shift workers from one part of the country to another is an unambiguous good. It's an efficiency. Workers are to be dealt with as interchangeable parts. But liberal economist Lester Thurow noted: "Business cannot function if everyone is always thinking about jumping ship and no one takes responsibility for the institution."

We are told that to stand in the way of more efficient modes of production, socially disruptive as they may be, is to stand in the way of history itself -- the wave of the future -- the inevitable. The root cause, we are told, is that individual preference and individual self-interest are the only true economic motivators. Then any consideration of social needs and values is pushed aside. What is best for our community, what is best for humanity as a whole, and what is best for coming generations become questions never asked.

The worst of it comes into focus as soon as you take future generations into account. Classical economics reckons without its host, the ecosystem. Supply rises as far as demand will carry it: We only need to produce ever more goods, provide ever more choices, and generate ever more consumption to ensure human happiness. Nature is treated as an external, material realm, available for limitless exploitation. The rivers and seas, the arable land, the oil and coal, the ambient air, minerals of all sorts -- we know these are limited in supply, but our economic system treats them as infinite, and treats every attempt to limit access to them as a compromise, an inefficiency in the system, something we'd be better off without. So long as we remain locked within the assumptions of economics as a supposedly "value-free discipline," a social science in which only rational calculations count, then every attempt to set limits -- limits to growth, limits to the accumulation of wealth, even limits to campaign contributions -- all these will fail, or end in grudging compromise, at best.

What alternative is there to the economics of limitlessness? In a wonderful book called *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community*, a theologian and a biologist, John Cobb and Charles Birch, propose as a unifying idea and ethic an "ecological model of life." It encompasses all levels of existence. An ecology, they say, is a dynamic, living system of "internal relations." All entities are inherently interdependent, and together -- the human world and the natural world -- constitute a living, breathing community. Out of balance, as when one element dominates the others -- it sickens. Unless balance is restored, unless true interdependence is gained, the whole organism may sicken unto death. These are now familiar observations, and underlie the sense that today we face a moral imperative: Our appetite for ever more must be curbed, and replaced with the ideal of "enough." In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare extolled "degree" -- that is, due measure, the opposite of limitlessness. "Take but degree away, untune that string, and hark what discord follows!..." Sheer "appetite" takes over:

And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power
Must make perforce a universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

Let's bring this down to the level of the individual -- any of us -- who reflects on his or her own values and makes serious personal commitments. This is the level at which any social change will have to begin. Hear the words of one young man, reflecting on his own and perhaps his generation's values and concerns. In an article in the Times last week, "Coming of Age, Seeking an Identity," Arlie Russell Hochschild interviewed Sandy de Lissovoy, a 29-year-old graphic designer in San Francisco. Mr. de Lissovoy said: "Today's hype is that 'You can get it if you really want it' -- a mate, career, and love still sells a lot of tickets. We're the Generation of Individual Choice. Which? Which? Which? But the bottom can fall out from some of those choices." That is, they turn out to be empty of value.

Mr. de Lissovoy's parents, we are told, divorced when he was an infant and now live on opposite coasts. He continued: "And in the end, we're orphans. We're supposed to take care of ourselves. That's our only choice."

Think of how quickly people are ushered in and out of hospitals these days -- often the same day -- in the name of efficiency, of course -- to be taken care of at home, if there's anybody at home to care.

In the interview, he also commented on the protests at World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle, protests that horrified the champions of a globalized economy. He said, "I hated the mindless anarchists who broke shop windows. But the other protesters who went there to speak up against mega-corporations running the show, and for the family farm, local communities, monarch butterflies and sea turtles -- they are taking the long view of the planet. We usually think it's the older generation that wants to preserve the past, and it's the young who don't mind tearing things up. In Seattle, the young environmentalists had their eye on history, and it was the old who had an eye on their pocketbooks."

What does Sandy de Lissovoy value and long for? "What I don't like is disposability, hyper-speed, consumption. I'd like to reduce these. What I want more of is face-to-face interaction, a value on repair, families living nearby each other. I'd love to live in a multi-generational, multi-racial co-housing project. And a more leisurely pace of life. I want some pretty old-fashioned things" [N.Y. Times, March 8, 2000, p. H10].

I like this guy. He is definitely out of step with the temper of the times, and so will we be, the more seriously we take these questions -- at the personal level, yes, but also at the global level, where the decisions that shape our lives are being made. Or maybe he's just somewhat ahead of the curve, and his words seem to me prophetic of a shifting temper, the temper of a time now in the making, when new perceptions of what is worthwhile and what is real will come to the fore.

What is economic justice? As a fundamental criterion for human activity, and especially of economic development, John Cobb and Charles Birch propose "a just and sustainable world." In a sustainable world, production and consumption proceed with an eye to sustainable systems and renewable resources. In a just society, each member achieves individual fulfillment, and all members recognize the solidarity of sharing in one another's fate. A just and sustainable world is not an impossible ideal. It is founded on the recognition that the ecosystem and the social system in which we live are finally one, and like any living system, it requires of us a due regard for limits. Only we must become part of it, body and soul, seeking its healing and sharing its fate!