

For the Greater Good

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The fine art of working for the greater good involves a paradox.

A lot about our religion involves a paradox, so this should come as no surprise. We live a rich life, caught between one thing and another, in the energy of active potential, objects falling, bonds breaking, fire burning. It's not a simple life, not an easy life, and certainly not a stable life—not stable in moments, anyway. It is stable in the big picture, stable like a waterfall—and just as hard, just as dangerous, just as powerful. I think this may qualify us as the most timid daredevils of the religious world. We don't sun dance, we don't fast for a month, we don't collectively sit for days of silence, we don't do much with our bodies—but we play fast and loose with our minds and our hearts. Timid daredevils. —another paradox.

So if we want to work for the greater good, we have to start at home, in our own place, with our own people. And working for it means we start out unhappy, dissatisfied, wanting change. We might even be grumpy and annoyed. We don't like it. But in order to do this work we must be convinced that there is no place better, nowhere else we could just go and be happy, and we must love this imperfect place, hating what it is enough to change it, at the same time loving, loving fiercely. We must hold on so tightly that we make diamonds from coal, pressure and heat ding the work of millennia of slow evolutionary change. Cultural change is, by tradition, slow, clumsy stuff, fraught with deep offenses and deeper rifts, involving half as much accomplished and twice as much effort as one might expect. With the same amount of effort directed anywhere else we could move mountains or build pyramids; if we do not engage in trying to change our world faster than it otherwise would, we have plenty of energy for everything else.

But we have been saddled with an internal compass that will not let us sit idly by while our world comes to terms with itself and creaks its way out of adolescence into something like a workaday life. We don't want that; we know what it can mean to do endless cycles of the same thing because there is no choice in sight and like parents, for ourselves we can manage, but for our world we will not stand for it. And so we tried, in the 1800's western civilization tried, to hurry it up, to move it along, to get it to the next place faster. For as much as it made better, we can see it also made things worse.

So now we are asking again, what does a culture look like if we make it that way on purpose? It is the question of the ancient Greeks, the question, perhaps, of some of the ancient cities of South Asia and maybe a few others. Few cultures that leave records are able to get enough distance from war, hunger, and weather to make those choices. We have plunged ourselves back into war here, but it is not *here* and so we do not live with the terror of daily bombings on this soil; we still have the luxury of attending to our culture and our development with a kind of deliberation ordinarily preserved for peacetime. We still have the space for cultural change. We still have the breathing room for self-examination. We still have the silence to listen for that still, small voice that cries out for something better.

Our sense of desperation in this time comes from our deep understanding that we are skating the edges of very thin ice; that without some change of direction and attitude, we will be plunged into deep conflict which will focus us sharply on food, clothing, shelter. For some, that focus might be comforting; for some, that focus might be motivating. For the members of our armed forces, that focus, welcome or unwelcome, is already here. Hence the panic. Hence the urgency. We have got to stem the tide; to turn it back. We have the opportunity to pull ourselves back from the brink of a survival existence and figure out how we should be—how we should be together. We have the opportunity to work toward world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

As a religious body we are covenanted to affirm that goal.

You see, our principles as they now stand are not simply about individual worth and interdependent world. There is a whole intricate scaffolding between them, linking the one to the other, and right beside the interdependent web is this goal of world community.

World community.

We are gathered to be in community, so we can practice being in community, because our whole world needs community.

And that means cultural change. Even within our congregations we struggle to remain in community and conversation sometimes. We don't have to like each other, although it helps. We don't have to love each other, although it helps. But we do have to love the institution to which we all belong, love it through its flaws, love it through its foibles, love it enough to make it into the kind of place we are proud to call a spiritual home.

So how do we work toward stronger community? It's an old, old concept, etymological origins simply tracing the evolution of language for the same idea. Community, a fellowship, a gathering, a coming-together. Com, like come, like coming, like gathering, like being drawn in, like welcome, there's come again. It is a foundation stone on which our language is built, this together stuff.

It makes sense. Our world, this human network that we have laid over the planet, relies on a social organization of people to exist. Even the desert fathers of early Christianity eventually found themselves at the centre of groups, wheels of learning with them at the hubs. Even the wisdom from solitary work eventually ends up common property—in books, in teachings, in folktales, in music. We are classic trees in the forest, falling, and somehow or other we must make a sound.

We are called to be connected to each other. We are called to be together. And together requires everyone. All the voices. Not just today's ennobled elite, not just the people who have money or power or titles, but everyone.

In June, 1919, after three previous failed votes, the United States Senate at long last passed a constitutional amendment granting women suffrage. The funny part is, it didn't start out necessary. With both black and woman suffrage, there was a beginning where some states enfranchised them, only later reversing that decision as popular opinion turned. Progress had become regression and so it was not until August 1920, when Tennessee became the 36th state to

ratify the change, that the amendment became an accomplished fact.

([http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Collier's_New_Encyclopedia_\(1921\)/Woman_suffrage](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Collier's_New_Encyclopedia_(1921)/Woman_suffrage)).

In order for that to happen, men who held the right to vote--who had held the right to vote for generations--had to choose to share their power. Unlike the black suffrage amendment (not to be confused with the actual possibility of black suffrage) which was as much strategy as ethical choice, this was a suffrage question with no war hanging over it, no threat underscoring it, and yet the tide of the vote eventually turned and men chose to share the power of the vote with women.

Why? What makes a group, unjustly placed above others, shift some of the power from their own shoulders to those whom society's structures would disenfranchise? If men had not chosen it women might still be without the vote, without voice, without political standing. There had to be thirty-eight separate votes (house, senate, and thirty-six state legislatures) before women could be universally enfranchised in the United States—thirty-eight occasions on which people in power chose to share power with people who had none. It is possible that every one of those legislators and the US president had a wife at home threatening to go on strike if he voted otherwise, but in all likelihood there was something else at work. That “sense of human decency,” famously referenced by Joseph Welsh in the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 has much older history than that. It is our overriding sense of human decency on which we have always relied to keep us from the demons of disrespect, hatred born of fear, and the relentless pull of the easy and unjust.

Time and again in our history it has been an inexplicable steel will that has defended our honor. Against all odds we have granted increasing freedom and social place to all people, acknowledging and rejecting power of the few by expanding it, population by population, to power of the many. While race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, national origin, and every other possible identity still play a role in public life, they have reliably faded from their initial importance by a combination of repeated exposure and deliberate action on the part of the power holders in our culture.

This is a cornerstone of democracy.

When people are unwilling to acknowledge their power or unwilling, once aware, to expand the power base, the heart and soul of rule of the people is corroded to the point of disintegration. What pass for ideals become jokes in the public and private eye, and the crumbs that remain are not fit to feed even the hungriest of our brothers and sisters longing for less oppressive regimes than their own.

We cannot let this happen. We will not let this happen. But to ensure our continued progress toward even-handed power structures we must commit to making our voices heard. It doesn't matter whom you support; it doesn't matter for whom you cast your ballot, or even if it is an election year. All of us have an obligation to speak up all the time, whenever we hear the arguments tipping away from material issues and toward gender, toward race, toward religion. We have an obligation to stand for what we all believe in, an even and fair process of making policy decisions, elections, and laws based on facts and not fears or stereotypes or repeating bad history.

It is sometimes hard to distinguish the common good from our fondest dreams and in those moments it behooves us to listen and listen hard. The voices we hear will give us some sense of

the possibilities, if dissent has not been quashed. If all we hear is silence, we must set to work unearthing the rest of the stories—there are always other stories—and then telling them. This kind of advocacy will not come naturally if they are stories that support positions other than our own, but a victory won by omission or silencing of an opposition is no honest victory and cannot be claimed by any but a coward. Ours is a democracy, not a culture of consensus, and as such we have no obligation to wait for every voice to be satisfied—but we do have an obligation to see that every voice is *heard*. The majority rules, but it must be an informed rule, an education that comes from every corner, every district, every identity, every person. If we are thinking we will reflexively account for those who cannot speak for themselves, but we must not assume that our awareness is complete. There is almost always someone who is not at the negotiating table whose vocal cords are working just fine, but whose presence was not arranged.

It is the obligation of those with power to comb the bushes and knock on doors or sometimes even move the meeting lock, stock, and rickety table to a better time or a better place. No one can presume to speak for someone else. No one can know the stories; no one can represent the wisdom. It is therefore incumbent on everyone to get all the possible people into the room.

Of course, no matter what you do, there may be some who are not available. Some will not come on principle; some will not come out of fear; some will not come for lack of childcare or transportation or money or time or energy or suitable clothing. Some people will not come because they do not care; some will leave you to flounder because they are too impatient to be educators that night. The fact is, if you sit in power you are asking a lot when you invite any minority or disempowered population to your table.

There is an alternative, but it requires great courage and unusual power and at least a modicum of research. You can go there. Get up from your table, shut down your computer, and go find the people you want to hear. Find them en masse, whoever they are; find them in books or on television if you can, learn the rules and the culture; find them in bars and restaurants and clubs and businesses and executive offices. Find them in *their* places of power, on their turf. Ask permission to be there. And if they will permit it, stay for a bit. Tape your mouth shut if necessary. And listen.

What we find, of course, is that no situation is laid out in monochrome once we leave the newsprint behind. And what better way to rediscover that “they” is a false identifier?

If you are sitting in this room right now you have power: power to listen and power to speak, power to participate and power to act in community. You have a place where you can belong; a place where the people around you believe that every voice matters and challenges are a place to grow. That is an incredible gift; just that makes every one of us profoundly lucky, and if we have no other place to start, we have this.

May our hearts open.

May our hands work.

May we be worthy of the stories we hear, of the trust we receive, and of all the power we hold.

Blessed be
and amen.