

Dross, Protest, and Change
January 1, 2012

Today's sermon is not one I thought I would deliver. I say this not only because Jamila had to attend to her very ill father in Arizona this weekend, but because New Year sermons are (theoretically) very predictable.

The New Year always looms large with possibilities. What a great feeling to be handed (what feels like) a clean slate to right the wrongs if one feels so inclined. The New Year holds some redemptive qualities, and tickles the imagination with myriad threads of hope. It's a different kind of hope than usual. Christmas sets the stage for a more ethereal hope by celebrating the potential of every child's birth. When lighting a candle to pierce the darkness, our spirit hopes to end the hostility that plagues the world. It inspires hope for peace and good will among all.

And Easter, too, is all about hope in terms of the rebirth of spring and the promise inherent in planting seeds for later harvests. At least Unitarians like to give Easter a bit of a nature spin, that after winter's frozen lifelessness, new life emerges as surely as the natural code of the universe prepares the way for a new season of plantings and promise.

New Years, however, usually points to a hope in a more political context – in that a new calendar gives us the sense of actually DOING things in a better and more productive way. Hope at New Year's spurs a new enthusiasm for trying to get life right this time, and a fresh 366 days might help make that happen. A fresh calendar makes the heart feel a greater urgency about making changes or "resolutions" for bettering one's personal life, as well as incorporating change for the sake of the world: For example, we hope that this is the year we finally reach a global accord to ensure environmental regulations, or this is the year we will end war, or this is the year nuclear weapons are eradicated from the planet or this is the year we reduce homelessness and poverty and discrimination.

As a minister I've always looked at the first service in January as a way to inspire a congregation to see its way out of some political morass and turmoil: I've spoken of the promise to end the Vietnam War, The Persian Gulf War, The Iraq war, The Afghanistan War. I've addressed the need for human rights, environmental sustainability, and corporate greed – all subject to change because the New Year brought with it great opportunities to change minds and hearts of humankind. (At least there is always the promise).

New Year's is when I take the world's pulse and try to determine what might be possible, where might we be headed, what work is there for me and for us to do. But when I approached this New Year's service in routine fashion, I was struck how enormously different it feels this year; our world is unrecognizable today from any other time in my memory. I see endless waves of discontentment. They are not

unique to any one specific area or culture, but sending tremors throughout the world.

I see 2012 as a year of many extraordinary changes, too complex or worrisome to even begin to understand. The only certainty for me in this radically changing world is that when we gather in January of next year, the politics, geography, and economics throughout the world as we presently know it, will be radically altered after 2012 runs through its 366 day course.

So today I offer more opinion than hope. But perhaps, underneath my sputtering attempts in analyzing this complex world on the brink of profound change - - perhaps "hope" somehow filters through the tumult impacting the entire world as we once knew it.

Our reading this morning, a Fable by Joseph Barndt, comes extremely close in identifying the state of our world today. A short recap: People in a certain kingdom were made happy by a Happiness Machine. As years and centuries wore on, the people who had access to the Happiness Machine became happier and happier. They placed their troubled feelings into the machine and the Happiness Machine purified them. But the residue of their troubles became dross, and the dross was dumped into a different part of the kingdom.

But then there were the people who lived where all the dross was dumped, and the dross made them very unhappy. These poor people were not permitted to use the Happiness Machine. They complained to the happy people about their problems but the happy people ignored their complaints. It was not long before the unhappy people began to protest more insistently about their situation. They demanded their fair share of happiness. The happy people turned a deaf ear to the protests, which only served to make the unhappy people angrier, and they protested all the more. Finally the happy people could no longer ignore the protests. They used force to put down the protesters, and arrested and jailed the leaders.

I look out upon the previous year as a time when populations throughout the world railed against the Happiness Machine that fulfilled the happiness of only a few; let's call it the global equivalent of the top 1 percent. And the rest of the world's people were mired in the dross dispensed by the privileged few. They cried out: "Enough."

The Arab Spring launched protests first in Tunisia. We hear it referred to as the Arab Awakening. Perhaps we can understand it as an "awakening" to the dross that has alienated the poor and marginalized them...the masses of people who wish a fairer distribution of happiness are in turn suppressed by those who use the Happiness Machine exclusively for themselves. This awakening, in the year 2011 alone, spread to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, where thousands of civilians were killed. The awakening spread to Bahrain, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Lebanon, Sudan, all met with violent responses by those happy people in power. It spread to Albania, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Uganda, the Maldives, China, Greece, France, England, and to Russia

where an Op-Ed piece last week in the New York Times said: “Most Russians are sick of the corruption, misrule, and poverty that plagues their country while the Kremlin elite feasts on the profits from oil and gas exports – and who can blame them?”

The awakening has spread even to Oshkosh, and thousands of U.S. cities in the Occupy Movement. And to all the protest movements the same question applies: Who can blame them?

As I wonder, like I do every year at this time, about how the unknown days and weeks and months will fill the year, this year, unlike any other time, I sense that the answer to how 2012 will unfold lies in the streets – the streets around the world where people confront the real-life Happiness Machine which are the structures and institutions of society. They produce food, clothing, cars and McMansions, resorts, and an accumulation of things and more things and most damaging of all – they produce law and order to protect the happiness of the few. The Happiness Machine does not make many people happy...and the dross of poverty, oppression, ghettos, unemployment, and no health care has driven tens of millions of people from various cultures and religions and ethnicities around the world to protest despite the violent efforts to dismiss their concerns.

A global effort has sprung into existence, one that refuses to accept the inequities as they exist and have existed. It feels to me like turning against the world of our fathers. What has been acceptable in terms of violating human dignity will no longer be tolerated. I think someday we will be able to point to the previous year, 2011, as the time the world order was unplugged. Habits, traditions, and authority no longer hold the center. There may not yet be a clear understanding of how change will be executed, and it may be defined differently by different cultures. At this point we simply don't understand the evolution of revolution taking place, be they in other cultures or even our own. My good friend, Jon Dobrer, wrote in his blog the other day that we no longer can discern good guys and bad guys. He wrote: “If we and NATO landed in the Middle East we'd have no idea whom to shoot and whom to protect. We don't know enough to understand our interests and the limits of our power. We don't like being spectators, but maybe the take-away from this year is the international version of the Hippocratic Oath: First do no harm.” (We can only hope to apply this in a new and changing world).

I am astounded by the common goals in the global movement. Historically we'll recall, those who were discontent with things as they were in society ran off to form their own Utopian society. Of course, these never worked past a couple of lean years. So the acceptance of things as they are, with few exceptions, ruled the mindset. Essentially the prevailing reality meant happiness for a few and the consequences of dross for the masses. And just like the fable, the occupiers around the world have a new vision and the stockholders in the Happiness Machine turn a deaf ear and blind eye, or, in fact, feel compelled to squelch the unruly disturbance.

The turbulence of youth is not a new invention. What gives today's movement such poignancy is that globalization itself – initiated to produce ever-new economic markets by exploiting the poor worldwide – this globalization has triggered a global movement among those who have suffered at the hands of those who control the Happiness Machine. These happy people have been knocked for a loop – many despots thrown off their thrones – more happy people to follow. The world that was has lost its balance. The tipping points are many:

- Warfare with drones and shock and awe and collateral damage doesn't cut it any more.
- Poisoning the earth, the air, the water, precluding a future for younger generations doesn't cut it any more.
- Greed and the illusion of buying happiness while filling the ghettos with dross doesn't cut it any more.
- Unemployment and poverty, no health care, homelessness, hopelessness doesn't cut it any more.
- Profits gained at the risk of worker safety and the health of the general public doesn't cut it any more.

Change is explosive. It contains many components of fear and anxiety. It couldn't be any other way. If we have to change our whole way of life – which is what is being demanded – we would naturally become upset and feel off-kilter.

Eric Hoffer, part philosopher, part longshoreman, author of *The True Believer*, sheds some light on our current situation. He said, "We used to think that revolution is the cause of change. Actually it is the other way around. Revolution is a by-product of change. Change comes first, and it is the difficulties and irritations inherent in change that set the stage for revolution."

The issue of inequality between rich and poor has been dealt with as a moral and spiritual concern going back to the Old Testament prophets. Accumulated wealth at the expense of others falls into the same category. What may be different now is the scale and proportion of the inequities. The gap in global incomes between the richest and poorest countries was around 3 to 1 in 1820; and 45 to 1 in 2005. The life expectancy of a child from England is 78; a child from Ethiopia is looking at a life of 48 years.

We're also dealing with the climate crisis where physical harm such as ecological exclusion of the poor by drought and flood is ignored by the leaders of rich nations who are beholden to those who seek extreme accumulation of wealth.

The economic theory these days, despite the high-risk activities of banks and multinational corporations that caused them to become unglued to satisfy inconceivable levels of personal greed...the theory is that individuals and nations

are advanced when these same corporations and investment banks are freed from legally-enforceable responsibilities such as paying a living wage, paying public taxes, or providing and respecting a healthy environment. Thus countries around the world face enormous debts, environmental degradation, increasing joblessness, and poverty.

And so people have taken to the streets around the world, and who can blame them? I always liked William Sloane Coffin's rhetorical question: why is it that when the wealthy take from the poor it's an economic plan, and when the poor try to take from the wealthy it's class warfare?

Let me remind you in case you didn't notice: The fable had no ending. It simply concluded that: "Some wanted to build an even bigger Happiness Machine in order to deal with the crisis they were facing. Others began to see that the Happiness Machine was not the solution to their problems, but the cause. They wanted to reduce the size of the Machine or even dismantle it altogether. Some even began to wish they could join together with the unhappy people to find solutions to the problem and build a new society."

The end of the story has not yet been written. The end will probably not be written in 2012, but we may catch a glimpse of how the story might end. And at some point we ourselves will have to decide our role in this huge global change: Build a bigger machine, a smaller machine, dismantle the machine, or build a new society?

We as individuals and as part of a progressive religious congregation will surely be making some key decisions in the coming year. I am not being facetious in wishing you a Happy New Year. I mean it as engaging in what will prove an interesting year with countless challenges. And rather than stand by as observers, perhaps we can help write the ending to the fable...which is, of course, the real story of our world.