

Relative Deprivation

August 31, 2008

Something tells me that not too many Unitarians missed Obama's acceptance speech last Thursday night. (It's just a hunch on my part, but if they took bets in Vegas on things like that, I'd put my money on 90% of all Unitarians not only watching Obama, but wiping away tears as he spoke). For those of us old enough to remember the oratory style of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sharing his dream of America's promise, we were reminded that the struggle for equality is not an exercise in futility. Change, unimaginable we thought in our lifetime, came to visit last Thursday, and the power of history visibly unfolding made it impossible to keep the eyes from tearing.

For those of us born after the Civil Rights movement, who read about Selma and lunch counter demonstrations and bus boycotts in their history books, Thursday's nomination of an African-American to the presidency of the United States gave testimony that we are on the threshold of a new chapter in American history. And the younger generations now have a responsibility to move the world forward since indeed, so many new opportunities are possible.

From all that I've been able to discern these last couple of weeks, the major issue of the campaign will not be about Iraq, nor about qualifications for commander in chief, nor terrorism, nor even the environment. The campaign will have no choice but to focus once again on the economy, stupid. Our country has grown even more unequal over the past eight years, as wealth keeps being concentrated among the most affluent Americans. The single biggest concern, the single biggest issue, the single biggest question of the campaign for the next 60 days will be: what kind of society do we want to live in?"

Barbara Ehrenreich from whom we heard in our second reading, a long-time critic of our economic system, claims that we not only have wide disparities between affluence and poverty, but we had to make a distinction these past few years between the affluent and the ueberrich. I don't know what image comes to your mind in calculating what ueberrich means, but Ehrenreach makes it easy for us with a rather repugnant image that captures the essence of her disdain, and probably ours, too. She writes that wealth has now reached such a pinnacle of extravagance among CEO hedge fund operators, (for example) that in addition to hiring interior decorators for their private jets, one guy threw a \$2million birthday party for his wife that included an ice sculpture in the form of Michelangelo's David ...urinating vodka.

What is shameful is not necessarily the plumbing of this ice statue, but that enormous wealth has been accumulated on the backs of those who struggle to fill their gas tanks, pay for medicine, and put food on the table. One member of our church recently told me of the resistance he encountered at University Hospital to treat his mother-in-law who is on Medicare. Not Medicaid, but Medicare. I visited another member in our church last week who is gravely sick at home who told me he had medical tests at St. Mark's that totaled \$17,000. They found nothing. He then went to Salt Lake Regional for a battery of tests running up a \$13,000 bill but they at least found an ailing liver which should have been obvious in the first round of tests. He said: "Who can afford to pay for this? I am worried how little medicare will cover."

What kind of society do we want to live in? Of course our society has always had a cleavage separating rich and poor, but the grab for money has created a different environment these past few years. Riches are amassed without any regard for one's neighbor; in fact much of the opulence today is only derived at the expense of cutting worker pensions and benefits to swell the profits of a company. Whatever is held in the lap of luxury often involves refusing to insure those who might make a claim, downsizing the workforce to boost share prices, laying off workers with seniority and replacing them with minimum wage earners, avoid paying overtime, and the whole Walmart mentality of capping employee pay and taking stools away from elderly workers. That's the obscenity of our times.

It's one thing to live in an unequal America, but the ever-widening gap between rich and poor has now wrought serious consequences. To ensure that the bottom line brings in staggering profits, the cost to everyone is a decaying environment, a crumbling infrastructure, public hospitals closing, Medicaid slashed, and teacher salaries unable to support a family. In the upward redistribution of wealth, taxes are cut for the wealthiest while services and programs are cut back for everyone else such as financial aid, health care, pensions, you name it. And the administration which fuels this inequality lays claim as the sole possessors of Christian virtue. It must be a new interpretation of Christianity. Jesus, as far as I recall, offered the blueprint of Christian economics beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. "Where one's treasure is, there the heart – the core of one's being – will also be.

Before the religious right claims as a Christian virtue the fact that the United States does less than any other rich democracy to redistribute income from the rich to the poor, I suggest they take a basic 101 course in early church history. Thomas Aquinas made clear in no uncertain terms that giving to the poor was not charity but what they rightfully deserved. And before Aquinas, St. Ambrose in 379 wrote that amassed fortune is like building a city in blood; it does not build your soul. Greed will only set fire to your city and burn it down.

What kind of society do we want to live in? The growing gap between rich and poor have consequences that can rock your mind. In studies at Harvard's School of Public Health, we discover that America now faces a decline in life expectancy. Between 1983 and 1999, men's life expectancy decreased in more than 50 counties. The news is worse for women where their life expectancy decreased in more than 900 counties. This means that 4% of men and 19% of women can expect their lives to be shorter than those of people in their home counties two decades ago.

The United States does not even make the top 40 among nations when it comes to life expectancy. Of course disparities in health between rich and poor are everywhere, but the gap between rich and poor in this country is far wider than anywhere else and has taken a toll. And, although people at the top of the American income spectrum live a long time, people at the top in other countries live a lot longer.

This represents a whole new field in public health where evidence shows that living in a society with wide disparities in health, wealth, and education is worse for all society's members, even the well off. The early research thus far indicates that high income inequality reverberates through society on multiple levels, correlating with, if not causing, more crime, less happiness, poorer mental and physical health, less racial harmony, and less civic and political participation. Thus - and here we need to focus our attention on the upcoming election - Tax policy and social-welfare programs take on a huge importance that extends beyond simply how much income people get to hold on to. The election is about the redistribution of wealth.

What kind of society do we want to live in? Republican orthodoxy protecting the wealth of the few who will generate jobs through a trickle-down ideology? Or the Democratic effort to completely redistribute wealth in our nation?

Voter response to these options are not as obvious as one might think, which is why I believe the presidential race is as close as it is. It has to do more with the American attitude towards wealth and poverty than trying to introduce economic justice as underscored in our Judeo-Christian tradition.

Elizabeth Gudrais writes: "On average, Americans have a higher tolerance for income inequality than their European counterparts. American attitudes focus on equality of opportunity, while Europeans tend to see fairness in equal outcomes." For me, there has always existed a judgmental attitude among Americans as they blame the poor for their predicament. Pulling oneself up by the bootstraps is an argument I heard while still in elementary school, situated in a black ghetto in Queens. The bootstrap notion argues that opportunity is equal to every American. Having grown up in an area with an uneven playing field, I never understood that argument.

Another argument that helps deliver tax breaks to the rich was actually fostered by John F. Kennedy's metaphor that a rising tide lifts all boats.

Yet a luxury yacht surrounded by dilapidated dinghies full of holes and on the verge of sinking, ought to make clear that the incoming tide will not benefit everyone. But it will be tough to get many Americans to think otherwise. And then there is the curious phenomenon known as relative deprivation. Let me tell you about it.

It was actually a British economist who introduced relative deprivation to the world in 1979. He echoed what the Roman statesman Seneca wrote before the birth of Jesus, that to be poor in the midst of riches is the worst of poverties. In a more modern context it means, and has been born out through various studies, that although people may well have their basic needs met; job security, living wage, decent benefits, etc, they will stress out knowing that other people have more. (Relative Deprivation).

Relative deprivation is responsible for our economic troubles today. The psychological distress caused by others having bigger and better toys, coupled with seductive advertising that makes you continually pine for more, made people embrace easy credit so irresponsibly in order to erase their sense of deprivation and finally enjoy what they believe they deserve.

The American promise which both Obama and McCain will discuss and debate boils down to the difference between a promise of greater equality through economic redistribution or the promise that opulence is available to everyone who is willing to work for it.

I was a guest two weeks ago at KPCW in Park City, where the we kicked around the question of whether or not we need a new American dream if we hope to survive on this planet. It's a great question because the American dream keeps changing. I remember when it was just owning a home with a white picket fence, but this relative deprivation has changed all of that. I just can't be happy in my home with my white picket fence and GE kitchen if there's another guy with seven houses. The American dream has gone from owning a modest piece of the pie to a voracious appetite and desire to have it all.

And the radio program was really about the environment. Will necessary sacrifices, needed to keep mother earth alive and thereby sustain the prospects of human existence, conflict with the relentless drive to accumulate mass wealth? It begs the question; Are we really that stupid where we opt for greater consumerism today while denying our children any hope for tomorrow? And the more I read

about relative deprivation and the condition of never feeling satisfaction because my neighbor has more, it seems too many of us are –in fact – that stupid.

And that's why the presidential race is close: as bad as the economy is, we cannot assume that voters will opt for a redistribution of wealth that may well compromise the current American dream of greed and becoming part of the ueberrich. I can well imagine plenty of people saying: I may be poor, but I'd rather hold on to the dream of my affluence than create wider economic parity.

In a World Values Survey that included 40 countries, Americans respondents were much more likely than Europeans (71% vs. 40%) to agree with the statement that the poor could escape poverty if they worked hard enough. Conversely, 54% of Europeans but only 30% of Americans agreed with the statement that luck determines income.

Labor Day became a holiday in 1894, largely a result of labor organizations trying to redistribute the wealth during our gilded age. But as we are keenly aware, Labor unions have struggled for years, not only against the Walmart establishments that fight to keep the unions out, but also against an individualistic psyche that still wants to believe: "I can attain the American dream myself." That the poor can escape poverty is written into the American creed.

So it will be a close race in November. The redistribution of wealth has a distinctly un-American ring to it. Sounds Marxist...like universal health care. Forget what the bible says. I want to be very rich. And when I get there I don't want to pay higher taxes. So the American promise can either be interpreted as economic fairness for the many, or as the promise that I can make it to the top. And I don't want to pay those taxes when I become ueberrich.

What kind of society do we want to live in? That was the question raised when the Jews were in exile 3000 years ago and were admonished to take only according to their needs so there would be enough food for everyone. It's the question raised today in the race for president of the United States. It's a question of biblical proportion.