

Following the Principles We Claim to Hold: Being the People We Claim To Be

By Robert Jensen

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If we transcend the sad, desperate triumphalist rhetoric of an empire in decline -- that is, if we break from the conventional platitudes about the inherent benevolence and superiority of the United States that underlie the politics of both major parties -- we can see clearly the breadth and depth of the problems we face.

Though it is easy for progressive people to focus on the smug frat-boy arrogance of George W. Bush and the shortsightedness, mendacity, and incompetence of his administration, the problem is not simply the reactionary policies of the current gang of thugs and thieves in Washington. Nor is the problem simply the timidity of a Democratic Party bereft of ideas, political acumen, or moral clarity in the face of the right-wing project. The problem is that we live in political, economic, and social systems that are fundamentally unjust and unsustainable.

Where do we look for insights into a path out of the madness of this system of white supremacy and patriarchy, of imperial domination and soulless capitalism, of an unsustainable high-energy/high-technology affluent society?

My focus will be familiar to Unitarians, who root their community not in a single theological system but the insights common to a variety of philosophical and theological systems. As we search the wisdom of the ages, it becomes clear that a few principles are at the foundation of almost all these systems. These can be succinctly expressed, I think, in the realm of the ethical, emotional, and intellectual.

First is the ethic of reciprocity, which we typically call the Golden Rule. Some version of that concept appears in every major tradition. The most common articulation of it in the culture in which I was raised is in the Christian Bible, Matthew 7:12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

Another recurring theme in so many systems of thought is the centrality of love and a call to expand both the scope and depth of our love. From our connections to those close to us, to our relationship with all of creation, the command is simply to love, and when we follow that we find within ourselves deep capacities for empathy, compassion, and solidarity.

Also embedded in all these traditions is an understanding of the need for humility, the imperative to recognize that what we know amounts to painfully little in the face of what there is to know that is beyond our capacity. As a result, our own survival depends on acting on our knowledge, which is impressive, but also remembering our ignorance, which is far deeper.

Do we actually believe in these principles? Do we believe in them enough to make them real in the world?

I think these ethical, emotional, and intellectual values lead inexorably to a certain kind of political project, what I would call a radical humanist democracy. And I think that project is at odds with the current political project called the United States of America.

In this country, we ask people to be decent within institutions that are indecent. We expect people to act ethically, lovingly, and wisely within systems that reject our deepest collective wisdom. We accept a society that is increasingly built on four dangerous fundamentalisms -- religious, national, economic, and technological -- each based on a rejection of some combination of those foundational ethical, emotional, and intellectual insights. We expect that somehow magically we will be better than the systems in which we live. This is a recipe for disaster.

So, it is with that collective wisdom of the ages at our backs -- the wisdom one finds across cultures, through time, in many different places -- that we can, and must, begin to call for the death of America. Or, to be more accurate, we can recognize that in some sense America is already dead.

By this, I don't mean that there is nothing in the United States of value, nothing worth saving, nothing noble or just.

But just as important, I don't just mean that we have some problems. I mean that the United States in 2006 is a dead society, that the basic systems on which the United States is based are bankrupt -- ecologically unsustainable and morally indefensible. The problem is that, while this seems clear enough to many others, and me the United States has not yet recognized its own death, which makes it a particularly dangerous nation.

To say that this state of affairs is a recipe for disaster is actually too optimistic; it is a disaster, unfolding before us. It is the disaster of a white-supremacist society in which black infant mortality is twice that of whites. It is the disaster of a male-supremacist society in which one of three women will be raped in her lifetime. It is the disaster of a society that prides itself on being "a nation of laws, not men" and then pursues an unlawful invasion in defiance of the entire civilized world, with predictably horrific results. It is the disaster of a capitalist society in which the privileged segment of the population engages in orgiastic binges of meaningless consumption while stepping over homeless people in the streets of every major city. It is the disaster of a society whose contempt for the non-human world has dug us into an ecological hole so deep that there may be no way we can pull ourselves out at this late date. And it is the disaster of a society that seems to believe that no matter what problems its own cleverness creates; it can rescue itself with more cleverness.

In this disaster, most of us in the United States are insulated by privilege from the most brutal consequences of these fundamentalisms. While this disaster unfolds in the so-called First World, centered in the United States, others bear the most crushing burdens. Such as the 500 children who die in Africa from poverty-related diseases that could be largely eliminated with minimal investment. If those 500 children lived in a world that wasn't structured on imperial domination and a rapacious global capitalism, they would have a chance to live. Those 500 children who die - - not every month, nor every week, nor every day. Those 500 children who die every hour. Those 500 children who died in the course of this service. Those 500 children who, if we believe our own principles, have exactly the same value as our own children.

This hyper-religious, pathologically nationalistic, brutally capitalist, inhumanly high-energy/high-technology society in which we live is a dead-end. There is no rescuing it. All that is left to do is say a few words over the grave, toss in a handful of dirt, and walk away as we often do at funerals

of people about whom we had mixed feelings -- remembering that there were some good things about the deceased, but secretly being glad they're gone.

America is dead. Thank God. Thank the gods. Thank the goddesses.

But there is much work to do to make sure that we bury the beast as quickly as possible, before it does more damage, before the damage is beyond repair. And there is even more work to do to imagine what the world will be when the beast is buried.

Many will say this is not a call for imagination, but an expression of insanity. Many will say that whatever the flaws of the systems in which we live, we have no choice but to find our place in them and try to mitigate the worst effects.

I recognize that it's possible I'm wrong about all this. I could be stone-cold crazy. I try to retain humility about the limits of my ability to understand a complex world. We all go forward with imperfect information and limited capacities. In the end, we all decide what to believe -- and how to act on that belief -- not solely on evidence and logic but on something in our gut. Here's what I can say with clarity:

When I look around at the world we have created, at the systems on which that world is based, I get a bad feeling in my gut. When I let the enormity of it flow over me -- when I let myself really see the state of the world -- I get scared. And I have a feeling that time is running out. If I sound harsh and impatient, it is because that feeling in my gut grows deeper each day, and each day I know we have lost more of the time we desperately need to imagine a new kind of society -- a society that taps into that collective wisdom rather than ignores it, a society in which we uphold the principles we claim to hold and have a fighting chance to be the people we say we want to be.

I do not know the origins of this creation -- intelligent or not, designed or not -- of which we are a part. But I know that we have both the capacity to destroy that creation, and the capacity to find our place within it. I know we have the capacity for arrogance that will lead us to that destruction, but I also know we all have within us a love that goes deep enough to create a new world within that larger creation.

It may turn out that we are a failed experiment. It may turn out that the human with the big brain is an evolutionary dead-end. It may be that we will struggle and fight, and in the end fail. It may be. There are no guarantees in this fragile world, for each of us personally or all of us collectively.

But there is always the struggle, and the joy of the struggle to honor what we know deep within us, individually and collectively. It is a struggle we can all join, a struggle we must join if we are to be the people we say we are.

Does that seem difficult? Yes, of course, it is. Of course it will be. It will be difficult for as long as we must struggle, which is the rest of our lives. How could it be otherwise?

Jesus was clear about this. In Matthew 7:12-14, he told his followers, "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

If one prefers a secular version, consider this line from “Bread and Circuses,” a hauntingly beautiful song by Billy Bragg and Natalie Merchant about the hypocrisy of so much of modern religion: “The gates of hell stand open wide, but the path of glory you walk single file.”

I like Bragg and Merchant’s vision of the path of glory. To walk that path is in many ways a solitary choice, one we must make when we are alone with our conscience. But when we walk the path, we do not walk alone; we walk single file. That means that when we step onto that path, there will be someone ahead of us, someone who can reach back when we stumble with a hand to pull us forward. And it means that there will be walking behind us someone who will need us to extend to them a hand.

Yes, there are solitary choices, hard choices, to be made. But no matter how easy the gates of hell appear to us, no matter how narrow and hard it seems it is to enter the gate that leads to life, we have the capacity to turn from destruction and toward life. We can hold onto that image of a hand extended, one to one, brother to sister, in a chain of life, anchoring us in the values we claim to hold: reciprocity, love, and humility.

It is that hand that holds the fate of the world. It is my hand. It is yours.

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