The Way of Life:
Spend, Tax, Cut – What? Congress’s Balancing Act and Ours

A sermon Delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, December 5, 2010

Readings


“When the [economic] system is designed to protect the privileges of the already strong and make the weak even more defenseless and vulnerable, something is wrong, and Christians [and all people of faith] should care about it.”

2) The Way of Life, Lao Tzu

How can one’s life keep its course
If you will not let it flow?
Those who flow as life flows know
They need no other force:
They feel no wear; they feel no tear,
They need no mending, no repair.

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Regaining Balance

A year ago at this season, I bought new ice hockey skates. On most Sunday nights, I continue to play ice hockey in a non-checking adult league, mostly with players under 35, and some in their early 20s – a recreational hobby that I took up again when I turned forty, after having not played since intra-mural games in college.

These new skates replaced a decrepit 18 year-old pair, and they are wonderful… very light! And initially they were a difficult challenge for several months.
What I discovered was that in some ways I had to relearn a little bit about how to skate.

The skates were the same brand, but updated, and my center of gravity and balance on these new ones was now just a little different. I need to bend my knees differently, hold my shoulders a little differently… not just standing still but also with every stride. It was unfamiliar enough that I had moments – too many moments – of imbalance…. at times slightly out of control… not feeling quite safe. And at unpredictable moments, skating felt a little dangerous.

At my age… I mean, at my stage of playing, being in the right position compensates for many short-comings, and being cautious, or falling down does not help my team, or my ego.

So there was an adjustment period last winter, and now gladly I no longer really think about my skates, or skating, or my balance, or fear of falling, or catching an edge inadvertently.

**I am better able to go with the flow, which is crucially important for success in hockey… and in Life.**

All of which, as you may have guessed, leads me into this morning's theme of balancing acts… centeredness… and beyond centeredness alone… centered in what?

Taoism is one of my guides this morning. Taoism, from ancient Chinese teachings, is represented among our banners of world faiths by the Yin Yang symbol. Taoism, like all spiritually healthy traditions, affirms integrity and virtue in action… over against expediency, compromise and indifference to our fellow travelers in this world.

Perhaps it is a certain Taoist bent that also informs President Obama’s actions, or lack of action, that some of his ardent supporters find troubling. I’ll come to that.

In part, this morning I am trying to understand core issues facing our nation: the economic problems we face and specifically the recent clamor around the budget, deficits, and a Presidential commission, plus Republican and Democratic values and strategies: the whole mess.

And behind all that, the real thing, the main thing is what narrative, what faith, what vision, what values anchor us in those debates? And even more deeply, what anchors us, you, personally throughout your days with our ordinary obstacles and joys?
Taoism like all these (represented by our banners) and other religious traditions is powerfully helpful in the face of the secular narratives, the cultural scripts, and secular seductions that seem to leave society off balance... out of sorts... unsafe for many at times

Secular Narratives/Scripts

I saw a cartoon recently... It’s there in your order of service, although missing the captions. If you look on the sheet with the words to our music, you will see it on the back side. (a blank sheet)

Along the top of the cartoon box, the caption reads, “See the 45 Million Poor Americans?” and points down....

And like this side of paper, it’s empty....

And the bottom caption is, “That’s the Problem.”

The poor too often are invisible....

As many of us know, economic inequality in our country has risen profoundly, beginning in the 1980s with Reaganomics, with the income of the wealthy almost doubling in that decade versus a decrease for the poorest in our society.

Income inequality moderated in the 1990s and then accelerated with President Bush’s administration.

Poor Americans earn less than they did 30 years ago, and one of our implicit narratives is that the Poor Don’t Count... aren’t worthy of attention, assistance or compassion because ours is a Land of opportunity and the Poor Must be Lazy. 69% of us believe we have high levels of social mobility based on skill and intelligence.

However, that narrative... the Land of Opportunity... that myth ... ignores the empirical studies that show we have less upward social mobility than any of the other industrialized nations, and more unequal than Guyana, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.

And “from 1980 to 2005, more than 80 percent of total increase in Americans' income went to the top 1 percent.” (“The United States of Inequality, Introducing the Great Divergence,” Timothy Noah, citing Paul Krugman in Slate, 9/3/10: http://www.slate.com/id/2266025/entry/2266026)
Something is out of sync... out of balance...

I remind you again of theologian Walter Brueggeman’s analysis of our American reality, the prevailing narrative: “the dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of the therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.”

“... therapeutic [that is, feel-good], technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.”

Something out of balance... dangerous.... So many things.....

A dominant script that includes a state-corporate capitalism that deepens inequality.

And as people faithful to service and building the Beloved Community, part of our task is defining and living a counter-cultural script, reading the signs of the times, and naming what is unfair.

To be sure there are other destructive scripts. The seductive scripts also include that of white supremacy, which we have to keep challenging, and scripts of sexism and heterosexism... But for this morning, again I focus on the economic stresses with so many solutions or evasions by partisan sides.

**Congress’s Balancing Act?**

One of the immediate issues and stories coming out of Washington has to do with extending “tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires.” Republicans took that position yesterday.

During the Bush Administration in 2001, tax rates were cut for all Americans with the proviso that those lower rates would expire at the end of this year. Democrats are proposing that those who earn $250,000 or more (or in another version, those who one earn $1 million or more) should not continue to receive those tax cuts. Such cuts valued at $115 billion a year will add to the already huge deficit, and since the wealthy have benefited so much over the past ten years, then it is only fair not to continue to favor them.

Republicans, on the other hand, argue everyone should be treated equally and want to extend the Bush tax cuts to everyone. In short, they don’t care for progressive taxation... or at least seek to limit it whenever and however they can.
Part of the Republican rationale is that taxing the wealthy leads to less spending and investments by those who can/could/should/would be stimulating the economy – the vacuous trickle-down theory.

Yet behind that is a deeper goal, it appears, to starve the government in order to force reduced government spending on programs that they object to – mostly social welfare spending that addresses issues of income inequality and poverty.

And embedded within that tends to be a libertarian, individualistic philosophy at odds with a communitarian ethic… and with Christian values… and our values.

As Jim Wallis, the prophetic, evangelical Christian leader of Sojourners community, notes, such a libertarian philosophy is the economic/political philosophy most antithetical to Christian values, and I would add to healthy religious values within every tradition.

I see a disconnect between the Christian piety often invoked on the political right and the consequences of their strategy. I don’t doubt their sincerity of belief, but there is a profound disconnect between stated values of Christian faith, things like… compassion, for example, and helping one’s neighbor, and serving the poor and the oppressed… disconnect between that and policy consequences.

It appears that the pervasive indoctrination/conditioning about American individualism trumps the espoused faith of many of these political leaders.

Trickle-down economics now being promoted again does not raise all boats…. It only raises all yachts.

Trickle-down economics is just one of a number of faith convictions that John Quiggin, an economist, describes in his book Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk among Us: destructive ideas that like zombies keep reappearing, rising from the dead, to inflict on-going harm.

Just a quick review of why we are in the economic mess which surrounds us. Three big things:

1. The Bush tax cuts in the early years of this decade,
2. the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and
3. the Great Recession, arising from among other things the housing bubble built upon corruption and greed.
These are the immediate causes of our deficits, while longer term, there are issues around escalating medical costs and the increasing costs for Social Security.

So there are these two deficits: Short term and long term. Plus fear about raising taxes, even though, strikingly, the exit poll results last November show that only 40% of voters approved of extending the tax cuts for everyone.

60% are ok in restoring the prior, higher tax rates at least for some, presumably for the wealthiest among us.... Yet politicians just can’t bring themselves to listen to the majority. The Congressional Budget Office also reports that extending the tax cuts is one of the least effective means of addressing needed job creation or our budget problems – yes... helpful, perhaps, maybe for a year or two, but such a dramatic loss of revenue is counterproductive long term.

So, what might be done? Just a bit more on the budget, and I know some of you are deeply engaged in this, others bewildered, and still others a little of both depending....

“OK, You Fix the Budget”

In our newsletter, I mention the NY Times’ article titled, “OK, You Fix the Budget” from mid-November (11/15/10) with its summary of Federal spending categories and income sources. If you took every one of the possibilities outlined, you would not only eliminate the deficit and balance the budget, but also actually run a vast surplus. David Leonhardt offers about 3 times the number of options needed to find a balance.

Admittedly, his charts and summaries are a little simplistic because we never know the full consequence of our choices; the law of unintended consequences is all around us. Yet I found it educational to review the large categories, and I found it to be a values clarification exercise, both in going through it and then reflecting upon my choices. If interested in having a discussion/workshop on it, please let me know.

Very briefly, in fixing the budget, I found in my choices a little more than half of my deficit fix in additional revenue by increasing taxes....

1. Mostly on the wealthy, their estates, capital gains, and not extending their Bush tax cuts,
2. on carbon emissions, and
3. on banks
For me, much of the **spending cuts** would come from reducing military expenditures on weapons, nuclear arsenals, the number of military personnel, and the war in Afghanistan and from capping some Medicare costs that would affect certain hospitals and doctors.

Many of us might have similar priorities, or not. Nor is a single-payer health care system contemplated, even considered, as another savings area. Lots of ifs and maybes, and your choices or mine might not be politically feasible, at least at the moment.

Yet, it is still astonishing that at certain moments of our national history dramatic value statements on behalf of the common weal have made profound differences.

And **it is heartening to me that 60% of us find it ok to forego at least some of those 2001 Bush tax cuts to help address the deficit.**

**An Alternative Script**

Again, as religious people

- seeking to build the Beloved Community,
- to serve others,
- to serve causes greater than our selves, and
- to transcend cynicism and despair,

I return to matters of deep faith... the values that anchor us... the values by which we choose to live, as **we pursue simple matters of integrity and honor, and as we affirm countervailing scripts that challenge unbridled individualism, imperialism, American exceptionalism, and greed.**

For this morning, there are elements of Taoism that empower, politically and personally.

Taoism speaks to me in its dynamic understanding of the unity of life, the mixture of joy and wounds, the balance we can find, and the harmony that comes to us when we honor the Way of Life, the Tao, the flow of Life, the flow of Creativity.

I especially think about Saul Alinsky, the wonderfully creative activist and organizer, who founded the Industrial Areas Foundation and whose strategies and values of community organizing have continuing influence.
Taoism is Alinsky’s religious grounding, although he did not quite put it exactly that way. Yet, in *Rules For Radicals*, Alinsky ponders the *Yin Yang* symbol of Chinese Taoism. It represents the seeming dualities of life and death, light and darkness, female and male and affirms that they complement one another rather than destroy one another. (p. 15)

And out of the tensions symbolized in the *Yin Yang* – out of the tensions arises Life, and this creative process itself anchors his hope. That Creative Process is where I too discover something mysterious and holy – perchance God-at-work – in the world. It offers to me (and Alinsky) ultimate optimism. It leaves me graciously, sometimes painfully, but always a “prisoner of hope.”

Many sources of such hope… each of us finding it in our own personal ways.

As troubling as partisan politics can be, and as corrupted as it is by lobbying and corporate interests, I also take heart from the vision and faith of one such as Vaclav Havel, playwright and former President of Czechoslovakia, who reminds us, “My experience and observations confirm that politics as the practice of morality is possible…. Genuine politics – politics worthy of the name –is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community and serving those who will come after us.”

President Obama is grounded in Saul Alinsky’s community organizing, experientially, in one of his first jobs. And strategically, politically, perhaps journalist and political analyst Richard Wolfe is right when he observes that Obama’s non-confrontational style boils down to two words: Independent voters. It is they who will determine the 2012 elections, and thus arises Obama’s desire not to be an intentionally polarizing figure.

And perhaps temperamentally, President Obama reflects a bit of this Taoist going with the flow, appearing simple-minded – even naïve at times, always seeking harmony and balance, always reaching out. Just maybe, there is a method to his ways, even when some of us want more confrontational politics.

**One of the goals of life in Taoism is to live with or to achieve Te.** The Chinese characters used to write *Te* are instructive and subject to two interpretations. In the first instance, the character for “upright” is joined to the character for “heart”: an upright heart… that is, virtue. The second perspective adds the character for “left foot,” which means stepping out. Thus, the meaning becomes virtue in action.
This quality, Te, virtue in action, is a deep quality that is uniquely expressed in each person, as a potential, a capacity, one that sometimes a person is not even aware of.

It strikes me that in Yiddish a person with Te might be called a mensch.

Most of our unhappiness, according to Taoism, is that we are too often guided by illusions – illusions for example that we are Separate from the Natural World. Or the illusion that some of us are Better Than Others or some of Deserve Obscenely More money than others. Sometimes we have unpleasant feelings or fear because of the illusion of What Might Be, an illusion because it has not yet happened. Or there is sadness from What Might Have Been, or What if, or If Only I Had….

Illusions such as Trickle Down… and Social Mobility….

Big egos – distracted egos – can throw us off balance and keep us from finding balance, harmony… flow… connection with all of Life… Then, we are unable to find virtue in action.

In society, we see also so many things that distress, that are not in balance… And we ourselves do not always stay in balance… We know/find gaps between our values and deeds, and even so, we carry on as people serving one other and serving big things like building the Beloved Community, and ordinary things like seeking virtue in action….

In closing, in a similar vein, one of my guides continues to be Anne Lamott, who reminds us

“You don’t always get what you want; you get what you get,” (Plan B, 81)

So, as she advises, “Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe.”

Virtue in action…

And I would add – if you give yourself to something greater than yourself, you may just get what you need.