

## The Legacy of Care

March 26, 2006

By Rev. Martha Niebanck  
First Parish in Brookline

**Reading:** “The Legacy of Care”

Thandeka

Despair is my private pain—Born from what I have failed to say, failed to do, failed to overcome.

Be still my inner self, let me rise to you, let me reach down into your pain and soothe you. I turn to you to renew my life. I turn to the world, the streets of the city, the worn tapestries of brokerage firms, drug dealers, private estates, personal things in the bag lady's cart—rage and pain in the faces that turn from me, afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew, as the life blood of generations who refused to surrender their humanity in an inhumane world, courses through my veins.

From within this world my despair is transformed to hope and I begin anew the legacy of caring.

**Reading:** “The Birth of Bread & Roses”

from A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn

The IWW became involved in a set of dramatic events in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in the year 1912, where the American Woolen Company owned four mills. The workers were immigrant families—Portuguese, French-Canadian, English, Irish, Russian, Italian, Syrian, Lithuanian, German, Polish, Belgian—who lived in crowded flammable wooden tenements. The average wage was \$8.76 a week. A woman physician in Lawrence, Dr. Elizabeth Shapleigh, wrote: “A considerable number of the boys and girls die within the first two or three years after beginning work...thirty-six out of every 100 of all the men and women who work in the mill die before or by the time they are twenty-five years of age.”

It was January, midwinter, when pay envelopes distributed to weavers at one of the mills—Polish women—showed that their wages, already too low to

feed their families, had been reduced. They stopped their looms and walked out of the mill. The next day, five thousand workers at another mill quit work, marched to still another mill, rushed the gates, shut off power to the looms, and called on the other workers to leave. Soon ten thousand workers were on strike. A telegram went to Joseph Ettor, a twenty-six-year-old Italian, an IWW leader in New York, to come to Lawrence to help conduct the strike. He came. A committee of fifty was set up, representing every nationality among the workers, to make the important decisions.

The IWW organized mass meetings and parades. The strikers had to supply food and fuel to 50,000 people (the entire population of Lawrence was 86,000); soup kitchens were set up, and money began arriving from all over the country—from trade unions, IWW locals, socialist groups, individuals. The Mayor called out the local militia; the Governor ordered out the state police. A parade of strikers was attacked by police a few weeks after the strike began. This led to rioting all that day. Martial law was declared, and citizens were forbidden to talk on the street.

In February, the strikers began mass picketing, seven thousand to ten thousand pickets in an endless chain, marching through the mill districts ... But their food was running out and the children were hungry. ... The IWW and the Socialist Party began to organize the children's exodus, taking applications from families. Still, the strikers held out. "They are always marching and singing," reporter Mary Heaton Vorse wrote. "The tired, gray crowds ebbing and flowing perpetually into the mills had waked and opened their mouths to sing." The American Woolen Company decided to give in. ... On March 14, 1912, ten thousand strikers gathered on the Lawrence Common and, with Bill Haywood presiding, voted to end the strike.

Following the lead of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the character and spirit of this strike was encompassed in the phrase "We want bread, but we want roses, too!" Working class culture has never been the same since the singing women and men of Lawrence.

### **Sermon**

I met Garrison Keillor a couple of weeks ago. When I told him that I am a Unitarian Universalist he smiled, looked down for a moment and said, "Ah yes. Ye shall know them by their clipboards—for gathering signatures on their petitions, doncha know." I invited him to worship with us, to come and

enjoy the good singing here. Without skipping a beat, he guessed that if we like to sing we must all be fallen Lutherans.

I suppose I am a fallen Lutheran. I was religiously educated at Saint Paul's Lutheran church in Teaneck, New Jersey. The giving and receiving of the offering was a high point in the Sunday morning ritual. The ushers collected money in shining brass platters and carried it up the center aisle to the minister. Pastor DeLawter raised the overflowing plate above his head as we sang the doxology.

*Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

I learned the theology of this event early in my childhood with my own offering envelope sealing in a quarter that might have purchased two ice cream cones or five candy bars or entrance to the Saturday matinee. I was taught by my teachers in the Sunday School that the quarter never was really mine, that it was always God's money. I was returning part of my allowance to God for God's use.

In my Lutheran Sunday School, God's primary purpose for the money was to take care of the poor—a continuation of the God's requirement made known to the Israelites in the words spoken by their prophets. When the pastor held up that platter that included my envelope I knew that together we were helping the poor somewhere. I took seriously the prophet Isaiah's words from the Hebrew scriptures:

(What is your calling?)

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see them naked, to cover them,  
and not hide yourself from your own kin?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

If you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted  
You shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

My Sunday school passed along the legacy of care in the voices of the Hebrew Prophets. The teaching I received at home was radically different. The money my father earned the hard way as a grocer was his money and he needed every penny to take care of his family. My father would groan when he'd see the white-collared pastor coming up the walk. "Here he comes again looking for money" was my father's complaint, growled in my mother's direction. "The ministry is a racket!" was his oft repeated refrain. Many years later, in a life review preceding his death, my father told me how as a young man he'd lost faith in the church and his respect for the clergy when the pastor of his childhood swindled the elders of the church out of their retirement money.

And so I, like some other Americans, carry two voices in my head. The voices argue about freedom and power, community and responsibility, autonomy and anarchy. These two voices worship two different gods. One god invites trusting surrender into the loving community other humans. The other god suggests a healthy paranoia as good protection against the sinful nature of fallen human nature. This god's motto is "every man for himself."

My financial biography, my economic DNA, generates those voices. My Dad and his Dad were wooed by the overheated economy of the 1920's. Converted from their communal life by promises of the god of the stock market, they were millionaires. My father and his rich friends rode horseback on trails far from the city every weekend. Here's what UU Chuck Collins, director of United for a Fair Economy, has to say about those times:

"The last time the wealthiest 1 percent of the American population owned 40 percent of the country was in 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression. The 1920s, a decade of anti labor repression and unrestricted market activity, allowed for a rapid concentration of wealth. Some economists have argued that growing inequality contributed to the Depression because the falling incomes of working people led to massive defaults on debts. At the same time, wealthy people had so much money that they were speculating wildly,

destabilizing the economy with unsound business deals, mergers and risky lending. (129)

The stock market crash and the Great Depression changed my father's circumstances: my father and his father found themselves back behind the counter in the grocery store because the folks who rented apartments in their heavily mortgaged buildings could not pay the rent. My grandfather's brother committed suicide when he couldn't pay the margin when the prices of the stocks he owned dropped.

The Great Depression convinced some people, but not all, that the god of unfettered capitalism is a false God—and that government's role in a democracy based on the dignity of each person is to restrain the market forces that create great divides between rich and poor. For example, the federal minimum wage was instituted in 1938 at time when one out of five workers was still out of work. It was meant to strengthen the depressed economy by increasing consumer purchasing power and generating new jobs to meet rising demand.

The minimum wage, in practice, succeeded: The United States was defined for decades after World War II by a growing middle class and decreasing poverty and inequality. Between 1947 and 1973, worker productivity rose 104 percent while the minimum wage rose 101 percent, adjusting for inflation.

My grandmother, my mother's mother, was the sole breadwinner in the family. She was the chief telephone operator in the Wilmington Delaware Federal Building. Every time the minimum wage was raised she got a raise. Later, when she was able to buy a retirement home in Florida, her pension was adjusted for inflation every year. She lived and aged in dignity being able to receive a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

In those very same years after the war, my Dad complained every time the minimum wage went up. His little grocery store was struggling on a very low margin and when the wages of his employees went up he made no profit. At the same time, his customers, recently arrived from the South and no loyalty to their local merchant, took their increased buying power to the brand new supermarket down the street.

As you might imagine, the voices from my economic biography are shouting “It’s *deja vu* all over again!” The patterns of 1929 surround us: The share of national income going to wages and salaries is at the lowest level since 1929. The share going to after-tax corporate profits is at the highest level since 1929. The top tenth of the richest 1 percent of taxpayers had more income than the bottom third of taxpayers combined. Between 1973 and 2004, worker productivity rose 78 percent, but the real minimum wage fell 24 percent. For average workers, hourly wages fell 11 percent, adjusting for inflation. (“A Just Minimum Wage,” p. 12)

If my grandmother were trying to support her family today, she might be living the life of this woman described by Rick Warzman of the Wall Street Journal:

“It was early April, and 46-year old Ms. Williams was dressed in the dark blue uniform that she wears at her first job, caring for the aged and infirm at a nursing home. Atop that was the gray apron she dons for her second job, cleaning offices at night. The place where she works as a nursing assistant was paying her \$5.55 an hour—barely above the minimum wage—even though she has been there more than 10 years...and completed college courses to become certified. The cleaning job, which she took up because she couldn’t make ends meet, pays right at the federally mandated minimum: \$5:15 an hour.” (“A Just Minimum Wage,” p. 2)

The Reverend Dr. James Ford of the Riverside Church writes in response to the widening gap between rich and poor, in response to the increasing poverty of the everyday worker:

“In recent times of calamity, our fellow Americans have amazed us with the speed and overwhelming magnitude of sacrificial giving in response to the Southeast Asian tsunami, the Gulf Coast hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and devastations from other natural disasters around the world. ...As fellow members of the human family, we are obligated to do something. ...Disaster relief verifies our awareness of the web of mutuality that binds us together in a network of interdependent brothers and sisters.... In contrast to such outpourings of compassion in high-visibility tragedies is the pattern of benign neglect, indifference or programmed unawareness of perilous problems all around us. Conditions we would consider intolerable if

the consequences broke out in a flash of sudden mass destruction.... Poverty is one of the silent killers in the life of our nation. Its cumulative effect is as devastating as earthquakes, floods, forest fires and hurricanes.... Poverty is a weapon of mass destruction in our midst. It is a weapon of mass destruction we can eliminate.... We close our eyes and our hearts at our own peril.” (“A Just Minimum Wage,” p. ii)

And just what is the peril we face? If we are people of the book who take the Bible seriously, we risk our right to call ourselves human if we fail our obligation to each other in the way we organize our communal economy.

If we are believers in democracy we are risking our right to say “We the people” in a way that has any real meaning. We face not just a wage gap but a democracy gap. A century ago, the Unitarian philosopher John Dewey observed, like Madison and Jefferson before him, that democracy has little content when big business rules the life of the country through its control of “the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation and communication, reinforced by command of the press, press agents and other means of publicity and propaganda.”

John Dewey wrote this in the days before radio, television, or mass media. (Chomsky, 52)

Any real participation by the people for the people requires time for rest, time for play, time for education. Downsized wages and super-sized wealth is undermining our economy, or democracy, and our humanity. To put it another way, “An America that doesn’t work for working people is not an America that works.” (“A Just Minimum Wage,” p. 43)

So how might we respond in the midst of this inequity that threatens our democracy and our humanity? I offer an incomplete list:

- Take the time to engage with workers in our midst—the cashiers and receptionists, the toll takers and bus drivers. Make eye contact. Say hello. Know that these are real people, daughters, sons, husbands and wives, your neighbors.
- Engage with your own work life. Calculate how much time is available for work, for rest, for play.

- Support Living Wage campaigns and the increase of the minimum wage. Know that without affordable housing and universal healthcare, any wage is only as good as what it can buy.
- Explore your own economic biography. Consider how we might create a new narrative for a global economy.

We've heard songs today that speak about times when ordinary people joined together and stood up for the shared value of simple human dignity. In a culture that invites us to think of ourselves as individuals who must rely on our own wits to survive we are left feeling vulnerable and insecure. In a religion that reminds us that we each have dignity and worth and that we are tied together in a garment of mutuality, the interdependent web of creation we can know ourselves to be carriers of the legacy of care. We will rise. We will rise together. Let us sing!

### **Resources**

**A Just Minimum Wage: Good For Workers, Business and Our Future**  
Produced by the American Friends Service Committee and the National Council of Churches USA in support of the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign 2005

**A People's History of the United States**  
Howard Zinn, 2003.

**Economic Apartheid In America: A Primer on Economic Inequality & Insecurity**  
Chuck Collins and Felice Yeskel, 2004.

**The Future of Capitalism: How Today's Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow's World**  
Lester C. Thurow, 1996.

**The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society**  
Amitai Etzioni, 1996.

**Transforming Liberalism: The Theology Of James Luther Adams**

George K. Beach, 2004.

**When Corporations Rule the World**

David Korten, 1995.