

ISARC Theological Reflection for Nov.8, 2007, Queen's Park Forum

By Sue Wilson, Office For Systemic Justice, Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada

When I looked at the flyer for this meeting, I noticed that it calls for an authentic poverty reduction strategy — and my attention was caught there. I'd like to take some time this morning to explore what that word "authentic" means for me in this context.

Let me begin with two little teachings, both of which I think are profoundly true, even though at first glance they may seem contradictory. The first is quite short: Abraham Heschel said that "Justice is another name for God." And the second teaching is this: The mystics of various major religions tell us that, in our search for God, we need to remember always that there is nothing to search for, nothing to attain. God is right here — within us and among us — but we miss God because our gaze is fixed elsewhere.

Now, on the one hand, one doesn't have to be too attentive to what's happening on this earth to realize that the world is not being shaped by patterns of justice. Indeed, I'm sure that we're all painfully aware that we live in a society that is too often being shaped, at very fundamental levels, by relationships of rivalry, control and exclusion — all of which are dominant assumptions in the current model of corporate-led globalization.

And yet, if I return to the wisdom of the mystics, that we don't have to search for God (this God who is the dynamic of Justice in the world) because God is right here, within us and among us, I am left with a paradox. What is this saying to us ... to people of faith? Where is this Justice?

Allow me to indulge in a story. Deepak Chopra tells a story about an experiment with cats. From the time they were born, these cats were kept in a room that had only horizontal lines painted on everything. Once they were mature, these cats were taken out of the room with horizontal lines and they interacted in a regular environment. The people doing the experiment found that the cats were constantly bumping into people's

legs or the legs of tables. Their brains had been wired to recognize only horizontal realities. And brains take in only what neural connections permit.

It seems to me that our socialization process has done much the same to us. It has taught us to see ourselves as separate, disconnected individuals and, to a great extent, we are blind to the ways in which we are profoundly connected to each other. When we were born, we entered into a world that was already shaped by dominant stories, by commonly accepted ways of understanding how this life works. As children, we were all indoctrinated into the narratives of extreme capitalism – a world in which identity is rooted in what you have, in what you wear and, most of all, in how you compare.

This way of being in relationship feels “normal” because (like the cats in the room with the horizontal lines) our minds and hearts are convinced that we have no choice but to live in relationships of rivalry, control and exclusion with each other. Our society and our political policies maintain the illusion that the ideal is to go through life being totally independent and self-sufficient, and so the dominant social pattern is to ignore the ways that we’ve benefitted from the support of others all throughout our lives even as we go about judging and punishing people who aren’t financially independent by giving them totally inadequate levels of social assistance. Likewise, we’re afraid that if we don’t protect what we have, others will come and take it away. So we chase the illusion of controlling others by putting in alarm systems, creating gated communities, and hiring more police. We accept without question the illusion that “more” for someone else means “less” for me, with one of the results being that, in our society, we see taxes as a negative part of life.

But, again, like the cats that could take in only horizontal realities and kept bumping into vertical objects, we keep bumping into realities that are trying to tell us we’ve got it all wrong. Sociological studies are consistently confirming the significance of a relational understanding of poverty, highlighting how a growing gap between rich and poor corresponds with key markers of social breakdown. Societies that have wider gaps

between rich and poor experience higher levels of violence, poorer health for all, lower levels of trust and community participation, and higher levels of racism and sexism.

Poverty is the term we use for relationships that are characterized by rivalry and control, by coercion and social exclusion. Poverty is the reality that opens our eyes to the ways that we've structured society so that it benefits the rich, by giving privileged access to limited resources, and marginalizes the poor. Once we recognize the realities of social breakdown for what they are (signs that we've got it all wrong), we can see poverty for what it is: violence. And as Gandhi said, poverty is the worst kind of violence because it is often not recognized for what it is.

Now, if I return to the paradox with which I started this morning: That God is Justice and that we do not need to search for God because God is right here, I believe this paradox is trying to lead us to the realization that Justice is about opening our "collective eyes" to the illusions that are currently shaping our society so that we might choose instead political policies that reflect our profound connection with each other.

This vision of our interconnectedness is at the heart of a life of faith. Our faith communities need to be taking the lead in shifting the consciousness that's shaping our eco-social and economic policies. In my faith tradition, the prophets call people of faith to be aware of how their faith-filled vision of community is being distorted by dominant social patterns and unjust economic structures. The prophets point to foundational stories such as the Wilderness Journey in Exodus – a journey in which the people learn about the "economy of enough" as well as the "practices of social inclusion" and see them both as concrete implications of their faith relationship with God.

Today, faith communities need to be the places where a critical mass is developed, a critical mass of people who see the illusions of corporate-led globalization for what they are; a critical mass of people who are shifting their personal, social, economic, political and ecological foundations. We need to be moving:

- from a sense of myself as a separate individual to a sense of my profound connection to all in Earth Community
- from finding our security in relationships of control to finding joy in relationships of shared power and partnership.
- from living patterns of rivalry and exclusion to the engagement of justice issues for the common good.

To be a person of faith is to know that there is an underlying fabric to our life together that can be trusted. The most profound and powerful dynamics in life are the stirrings of justice and compassion. For people of faith, this is what is most authentic: to trust in the stirrings of justice and compassion. And what does this mean when it comes to addressing poverty?

Yes, it means we need to convince our politicians to create effective strategies to address poverty. And, yes, it means we need to be learning from the experiences and insights of those who face economic barriers in order to identify effective strategies.

But it also means that we need to create the context for this to happen. We need to be clear in our faith communities that a faith-filled approach to economics is one of solidarity. We need to acknowledge in our faith communities that there is such a thing as having too much and taking too much and that, as a society, we have gone very far down that road.

Let me finish by returning to the paradox. Justice is right here but we've been "wired" in such a way that we're blind to it. We have, right here and now, all that we need for justice, but we must deepen the consciousness out of which we live. We need to see each other differently, to understand each other differently, if justice is to be the concrete reality that it is meant to be. And this is work that faith and politics must achieve together.

