

Courage and Common Security¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Our readings today were two poems: "In Those Years," by Adrienne Rich, and an excerpt from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman.² Excerpts from the readings:

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I...

Rich

This is what you should do:
Love the earth and sun and animals,
despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks,
stand up for the stupid and crazy,
devote your income and labor to others...hate tyrants,
argue not concerning God,
have patience and indulgence toward the people...
reexamine all you have been told in school or church or in any book,
dismiss what insults your very soul,
and your flesh shall become a great poem.

Whitman

Sermon

We live in a time of increasing economic insecurity. In our culture, we are taught to keep our economic lives a secret—more than religion or politics or sex—we just don't talk about our income or debt or other monetary realities. But from quiet conversations, I have learned about many members of our congregation who have lost jobs, retirement income, or have family members who cannot find jobs, or are struggling financially. We know that millions of families nationwide have lost their homes. Many people have had to cancel retirement because their savings were decimated by the stock market collapse.

In my own family, two sisters in Michigan lost their jobs within the last few years. One of them was about to get married, and so had the safety net of her new husband's income. The other sister moved to my parent's home in West Virginia, and though she found some part-time work for a while, she is now without income, health insurance, or other resources.

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2 Excerpt from Preface to 1855 edition, *Leaves of Grass*.

Jacob Hacker has written about how common insecurities have been increasingly shifted to individuals and families as many of our social institutions have been dismantled. In 1980, the majority of employers at medium to large companies paid 100% of family health insurance. Now, less than a quarter do. Medical costs were a factor in as many as 700,000 personal bankruptcies in 2001, and that situation has only gotten worse. Employer pension plans are declining and so more and more families are on their own to figure out retirement options.

Fewer workers have long-term employment, and more and more are working in temporary or low-paying underemployment. Wages have been stagnant or falling, and more households have had to rely on two incomes to cover the same needs. Parents with children are most at risk for bankruptcy and foreclosure, and single parents are especially vulnerable. Support systems such as extended families are disrupted by geographic distance.³

It is a bleak picture. People in our country are so shook up that they just kicked out a large percentage of our elected officials. Whether that will be helpful or not remains to be seen. As pollster Scott Rasmussen said to a conservative think tank gathering, Republicans should remember, "they didn't win. The other team lost," and "Only 21 percent of Americans believe the government has the consent of the governed."⁴ The mood of the country might be described as panic and discouragement.

In the midst of these economic insecurities, there are basically two paths before us—in one, we each hunker down, and try to fend for ourselves as individuals and families. In the other, we turn to our neighbors, and make a common purpose to find security and a way forward. I believe we are called by all the values of our tradition to choose the path of common security with each other. And ultimately, I believe that is the only path that will help us survive.

However, there are strong pressures in our society toward fending for ourselves. Think about some of the beliefs we have been taught about economic success and failure:

"Economic struggles are a reason for personal shame.
You are on your own.
Don't talk about your economic reality with anyone else.
You can pull yourself up by your bootstraps.
Watch out for people less fortunate than yourself—they will want to take your stuff.
Government programs will encourage laziness."⁵

Sound familiar?

3 From "The Great Risk Shift," *Common Security Club* Session #4, Background Information, Attachment 4-3.

4 Portland Press Herald, November 11, 2010, "Pollster's take on historic shift of political power: Cynicism won," by Ann S. Kim, p. B1-2.

5 Examples from Introductory Session, Common Security Clubs, www.commonsecurityclubs.org.

These beliefs go back a long time. Chip Berlet, author of *Right-Wing Populism in America*, writes that the anti-collective attitudes currently expressed in the Tea Party movement find their roots in earlier Protestant theologies of America. "If you read Protestant sermons from the late 1800s, they sound like Glenn Beck on a good day. They're anti-government, anti-collective, antiunion. The idea is that good Protestants don't depend on the government. Individualism and hard work and capitalism are seen as a kind of package deal."⁶

He goes on to describe how our social safety net was not constructed until Franklin D. Roosevelt pushed back against the banks and financial sector during the depression. "That was a real change in how Americans looked at government." And even then there was "a campaign against Roosevelt, claiming that big government was the road to socialism and fascism." These fears had a basis in the socialist movements in Germany and Russia that had produced totalitarian governments during the 1930s and 40s.⁷

Individualists propose that we let the market work it out. Give free reign to businesses and corporations with the expectation that, unencumbered, they will restore the economy to prosperity. Then, stock prices and jobs will rebound, and all will be well again.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with this analysis. One problem is that it ignores the vital scaffolding of common resources that we share and take for granted. Our economic and personal well-being is directly dependent upon things like good roads, traffic control, public transportation, community fire departments, and public schools; police protection, libraries, and public parks—all of these commonly held resources make our individual and corporate initiative possible. Yet they are not figured into the cost and benefit accounting in the market economy. If these common resources are not protected, hazards abound. A family in Tennessee lost their home to a fire because they had not paid their subscription cost to the local fire company. The fire fighters were under orders to let it burn down. Is that the future we want?

Another problem is that we have been treating the earth as a limitless resource to be used with no regard for future needs. Clean water, fresh air, thriving forests, and fertile soil are the underpinning of all economic and personal wealth, and we have been destroying them at an unprecedented speed. An economic model based on continuous growth is no longer feasible. We are beginning to realize that there is only one earth, and its resources are finite.

These natural limits are beginning to create tensions around the world. In just one of many examples, fierce battles are beginning to be waged over how we will manage increasing shortages of water in many places. While private interests are clamoring to control ownership of these resources, other of us are asserting that such fundamentals must belong to all Life. They cannot be separated and sold for the profit of a few.

6 From an Interview by David Barsamian, published in *The Sun*, November 2010: "Brewing Up Trouble: Chip Berlet on the Tea Party and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism," p. 10.

7 Ibid., p. 8-9.

But I don't want to just talk about all the bad stuff—you are probably already well aware of how it is. I want to share with you some of the good stuff that is out there to help us come together to find resilience and courage during these hard times. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to participate in a facilitator training for something called Common Security Clubs. Common Security Clubs are groups of 10-20 people who gather together in regular meetings to support each other through economic changes.

Our trainer Chuck Collins wrote⁸:

"The dominant messages in the U.S. economy are "you are on your own" and "some people are going to be left behind." Countering this isn't easy. For many, talking about their economic anxiety and asking for help is difficult and shaming. But to survive the coming period of uncertainty, we must regain use of our mutual-aid muscles, many of which have atrophied from lack of use."

The three main functions of Common Security Clubs are, one, to increase our understanding of the larger economic forces on our lives, two, to open up opportunities for mutual aid and support for local economic challenges, and three, to engage in social action to create changes that can bring about a more secure and sustainable future.

We explore questions like: Why is the economy in distress? What is our vision for a healthy, sustainable economy? What are the sources of real security in our lives? What can we do together to increase our economic security at the local level? How can we help our neighbors facing foreclosure or economic insecurity? What public policies would make our communities more secure?

Last weekend, I participated in the Northern New England District's Environmental Justice Conference. One of my colleague, Rev. Daniel Jantos, reflected on what he needed to be able to work on transitioning to a sustainable future. One of the most important things was the assurance that there would be good people along with him in the work—that he would not be alone. That resonates for me as well.

Social scientists say that the stronger our social networks, the more resilient we will be in a crisis. When I was working in direct support of homeless people, I noticed how often someone became homeless because of isolation—they did not have a strong social support system, and so a crisis became a catastrophe.

There are many ways that working together can enhance our economic well-being. For example, one idea that came out of Common Security Clubs was a weatherization round robin—a team of five people agree to help each other doing projects at each of their houses. Each host buys materials such as caulk and plastic sheeting, and then the group spends a few weekends getting

⁸ Introductory Session, Common Security Clubs, www.commonsecurityclubs.org.

all their homes ready for the winter. Another idea was a babysitting coop, where parents take turns watching each other's children, keeping track with tokens for hours of childcare. Tool sharing, job swapping, meal exchanges, bartering—the resources we have among us are many, and the options are only limited by our collective creativity.

Juliet Schorr, in her book, *Plenitude*, offers a model of transition to a sustainable economy based on a deeper understanding of true wealth and well-being. For example, she sees *time* as an overlooked resource—Americans have collectively been working longer and longer hours in what she calls the “business as usual” sector. If we all worked fewer hours, more people could have jobs, and our overall quality of life would improve. On a smaller, more immediate scale, she suggests that by working fewer hours in the labor market, we can use our new “time affluence” for making things rather than buying, sharing rather than spending, and building our social relationships.

Schor suggests that we can reduce our reliance on the market by “creative high-tech self-provisioning”: growing food using permaculture and community gardens, building homes with free shared labor and local, natural materials, creating energy on a small scale. She expects that an important part of these transitions will be creative inventions and entrepreneuring. She mentions, for example, the new Fab-Lab technologies—small, smart machines that can fabricate almost anything, and thus allow us to move away from the model of large factories devoted to particular products. She points out that the more we diversify the ways we meet our basic needs, the more resilient we can be through changing economies.⁹

While I was at the NNED Conference, I learned that there are two million organizations around the world, working toward a future of environmental sustainability and economic transformation. It is the largest grass-roots movement in the history of the world. We don't hear about it on the news because too often the media corporations have a vested interest in business as usual. Change always happens from the ground up—never from the top. Being a part of that vast movement of small groups around the world—that gives me hope and courage.

What does all this have to do with our spiritual communities? Or perhaps the real question might be, how are spiritual communities going to be a resource for thriving in the midst of economic struggles and transitions? One obvious response is that we have been creating social connections for a long time. By that very function alone, we help to foster community resilience. It has been shown that people who attend church regularly—live longer¹⁰, are less lonely, and are happier¹¹, in general, than people without churches.

9 Juliet Schor, *Plenitude: the new economics of true wealth*, Penguin Press, 2010.

10 According to a study, noted at <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06094/679237-51.stm>

11 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/301/are-we-happy-yet>

There are also practical ways that we help each other. We network with each other informally about jobs and resources. We have a Fund that can help people in a financial crisis—if you are in need, please talk to me about that. We listen to each other when we are feeling frightened or worried. We care about each other's well-being. Our connections with each other help us find courage for living in these times.

At A2U2, we are hoping to start a Common Security Club this winter, in order to offer more direct support to our members in facing the changing economy. I have put a sign-up sheet at the back of the church, if you would like to get further information about that. We are planning an introductory session for Wednesday, December 15.¹² We are really at the beginning of how we might support each other through these changing times. I hope we will find many other ways to be there for each other.

On a deeper level, as a spiritual community, we articulate important and enduring values, countering the economic myths that promote self-interest and greed. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person—that our true worth is not related to our “net economic worth.” We affirm the value of community, of loving our neighbor as ourself. We affirm the value of those who are in need—whether that need be economic or personal or social. We challenge the culture of winners and losers—Jesus famously said, “the last shall be first, and the first last,” and “the greatest among you should be the servant of all.”

One of the most important things we can do is help to shift the deeper understandings of our society, the meanings we give to the world and to our lives. We help each other to awaken to the reality that no one is separate from anyone else—that we are all in this together.

I saw a cartoon the other day. Four people were sitting in a boat that had tilted precariously and was filling with water at one end. The two people at that end were bailing furiously. The two people at the other end were sitting high and dry—and one said to the other, “It's good that our end of the boat isn't leaking.”

We are all in the same boat—this planet earth. The only real security we can create is a common security. When we finally realize that we are one family, one interconnected whole, we will be able to find a way forward together. I believe we are already on the path. May we find the courage to take the next steps before us.

¹² To sign up for the event, contact me at revmyke@a2u2.org.