



Healing the World, Healing Ourselves

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER

IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE AMONG THOSE who have joined our newly formed interfaith international organization, the Network of Spiritual Progressives (NSP), which includes “spiritual but not religious” people, that the healing of our world must go hand in hand with our inner healing. And yet I’ve noticed a strong and continuing tendency to split these two intentions apart. Most people experience their spiritual natures during meditation or prayer, at a zendo, church, synagogue, or mosque or while on a spiritual retreat in some beautiful remote location, and then feel perfectly fine falling back into a more utilitarian or technocratic frame of mind when they return to work or engage in political change activities. Even when developing a more ecologically hopeful or ethically grounded vision for the world, many still look to “hard science” to validate their ethical or spiritual intuitions. At some level, they don’t believe that their spiritual values or experiences will be taken seriously as authentic wisdom by those in positions of power unless those values or experiences are backed by “evidence” from a scientific way of knowing the world.

In my books *The Left Hand of God* (HarperOne, 2006) and *Spirit Matters* (Hampton Roads, 2000), I’ve shown that this reliance on scientific evidence

for ethical or spiritual truth is usually a capitulation to another religious system, “the religion of scientism.” The central belief of this religion—that whatever is real or can be known is only that which can be verified through sense data or measured—is itself as groundless as that of any other religious system. By its own criterion, this belief is either false or meaningless because the statement itself is not derived from or verifiable through any empirical data or measurement. It is simply the common sense of a materialistic age parading as the principle of rationality, and is no more grounded than any other such belief system.

Nevertheless, many spiritual activists still fear they would be seen as irrational or lacking in intellectual integrity were they to repudiate, challenge, or move beyond a metaphysical grounding in scientism. Yet such a move is precisely what is needed if we are to develop a spiritual politics sufficient to help heal and transform our world.

A NEW BOTTOM LINE

A first step in this new direction is the attempt by the NSP to affirm a New Bottom Line or a new criteria for rationality. Briefly stated, it is this:



“Any institution, social practice, corporation, governmental activity, legislation, educational system, health care system, or even personal behavior should be judged ‘efficient,’ ‘rational,’ or ‘productive’ not only to the extent that it maximizes money, power, or some such externally measurable outcome (the Old Bottom Line) but also to the extent that it maximizes love, caring, kindness, generosity, openheartedness, ethical and ecological sensitivity, and enhances our capacity to respond to others in a noninstrumental way as embodiments of the sacred and to respond to the universe with awe, wonder, and radical amazement at all that is.”

Imagine your workplace, your government, your school system, your medical system, and your friends all taking this New Bottom Line seriously. Instead of dismissing it according to criteria of the dominant scientific religion (“How do you measure love? How do you verify empirically the impact on productivity when people are responding to the universe with awe and wonder?”), they would work alongside the spiritually and emotionally literate to promote change. That could include redeveloping the content of education and its delivery system, re-visioning our factories and what we seek to produce in them, or helping to pass legislation that rewards government employees for New Bottom Line behavior, such as how well they’ve succeeded in making ordinary citizens feel that their needs are being met, or the degree to which an agency hires, promotes, or fires an employee based on how much caring they have shown to the people they serve.

This is a very different approach from a political platform that seeks better pay for teachers or government employees or more funding for health care, housing, or transportation (what I call “objective caring”). It’s not that those programs are unnecessary, but they don’t go deeply enough into the central pathologies that keep our society heading in the wrong direction.

Let’s take education, for example. It’s true that we need beautiful and functional buildings, textbooks for every student, well-trained teachers, and smaller teacher-to-student ratios. But from the spiritual progressive’s standpoint, activists (and teachers’ unions) too often omit from their agendas issues of *what* is being taught and *how*. If our goal is to help transform

students into loving, caring citizens who treat others as embodiments of the sacred and who see the universe with awe and wonder, we are going to have to fundamentally restructure our entire notion of education. This is not a 1960s-style call to empower students to determine their own education according to what they think is “relevant.” It’s about a clear vision of how adults take responsibility for developing in students loving and spiritual sensibilities, without imposing any particular religion or view of God. Going further, a teacher can’t teach another to be loving or spiritually sensitive unless the teacher is loving and spiritually sensitive. In the context of a spiritual politics, such goals aren’t plausible unless the activists are able to embody those goals to some extent so that others can witness living examples of what is being taught.

As for dealing with poverty, most programs, from the New Deal of the 1930s to ONE (The Campaign to Make Poverty History), have sought to reduce poverty and to free people from some of the worst impacts of the “free market” by providing social supports or by reducing or forgiving some elements of debt. While these programs have reduced some of the worst aspects of material suffering, they have never been funded at a level that could create an economic infrastructure sufficient to lift the majority of the world’s poor to economic well-being. Because these plans didn’t succeed in doing what they actually never set out to do—completely eliminate poverty—people paying taxes into these programs have seen those taxes rise year after year without a corresponding improvement in the material or spiritual condition of their country’s poor. Moreover, these programs represent “objective caring” (namely, money), not “subjective caring.” In other words, the benefits often do not reflect serious attempts to affirm caring bonds between human beings or to affirm generosity and caring as central values that motivate a program and the people who implement it. Many on the receiving end of these programs can report on the insensitive and even boorish ways that domestic welfare or foreign aid has been delivered. In the absence of any real caring, some recipients have felt justified in exploiting this system.

Applying the New Bottom Line to foreign policy, spiritual progressives believe that the only plausible path to environmental security and global survival is for

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the United States and other major powers to stop framing the issues in terms of “what is best for the United States” and to start recognizing that this country’s well-being depends on the well-being of everyone else on the planet and the health of the planet itself. Such unity consciousness, appropriately championed by spiritual wisdom, is now a practical survival necessity for the human race. From this perspective, “homeland security” can best be achieved through generosity and caring for others around the globe in ways that are transparently sincere. Such a strategy of generosity is the foreign policy plank of the NSP’s Spiritual Covenant with America.

Imagine how much more successful Israeli policy toward Palestinians would be if, instead of participating in an endless cycle of violence, Israel began to build huge housing projects in Gaza and the West Bank so that Palestinians could live in comfortable and sanitary conditions. Or if the leadership of Israel were to publicly apologize for the unnecessary deaths caused by the occupation and send letters to each Palestinian family affected by these forty years of violence asking for forgiveness, expressing sadness at what has happened, and offering compensation. These seemingly merely symbolic acts would show a change toward openheartedness which, if accompanied by a realistic peace plan along the lines I’ve defined in *Healing Israel/Palestine* (North Atlantic Books, 2003), could create the preconditions for a lasting settlement of the conflict.

My proposed plan calls for the creation of an economically and politically viable Palestinian state in all of the West Bank and Gaza; recognition by the Arab states of both Israel and Palestine; reparations for Palestinians who lost property or employment from 1948 to the present, as well as reparations for Jews who fled Arab lands in that same period; an end to the teaching of hatred in the schools and media of both sides; a truth and reconciliation commission similar to that which provided a path to peace in South Africa; and mutual defense agreements for both Israel and Palestine endorsed by NATO. Yet without a perceived spirit

of generosity as the central ingredient in the process, no set of technical agreements, however brilliant, will overcome the generations of fear and anger that have been produced by this painful struggle.

A GLOBAL MARSHALL PLAN

In this spirit of generosity, the NSP has ambitiously proposed a Global Marshall Plan (to work alongside or be merged with Al Gore’s more ecologically oriented, same-named program). It seeks to have the advanced industrial countries of the world use their resources to eliminate once and for all global poverty, homelessness, and hunger; provide quality education and health care for all; and repair the global environment. As an initial commitment, it asks the United States to donate 1 to 2 percent of its Gross Domestic Product each year for the next twenty years to launch and help fund this effort. The plan is built on the following principles:

(1) Eschewing past initiatives that have used the concept of generosity as a savvy cover for the pursuit of self- and national interest, all elements of the NSP’s global plan will be administered in ways that reflect the qualities of love, kindness, generosity, compassion, ecological sensitivity, and nonviolence and that also foster in all involved parties the ability to act on those values.

(2) Funds will be given to an international agency and governed by an international board of cultural, religious, spiritual, social justice, and environmental activist leaders who have a proven history of commitment to peace, social justice, and the elimination of poverty. This agency will then hire economists, sociologists, environmentalists, lawyers, public health care activists, educational reform activists, and other professional experts who share a strong commitment to local autonomy, social justice, peace, and respect for local cultural and religious traditions. This team will develop plans to be presented to the international board.

(3) The international board will work with national boards similarly composed of cultural, religious, spiritual,

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NGO, and local social justice and environmental activist leaders that will develop and then submit national plans to the international board for approval and funding.

(4) All previously negotiated international trade agreements shaped by the advanced industrial societies will be reconceptualized and amended to ensure that they work in the best interests of underdeveloped countries and not primarily to serve multinational corporations or the interests of the developed world. For example, new trade agreements will seek to support local farmers throughout the world rather than providing special benefits for the industrial farmers and corporate farming models of the European Union and the United States. Similarly, such agreements will favor the needs and rights of workers to organize and secure a living wage.

(5) All plans approved by the board will be rigorously screened to ensure that they meet the following criteria: They are environmentally sound and enhance sustainability; they value growth only insofar as that growth is compatible with the ecological balance of each local region and the welfare of the planet as a whole; they enhance the ability of people to value one another and to recognize and support diversity, generosity, cooperation, and nonviolence; and they are implemented in ways that are sensitive to local cultural nuances and needs.

(6) All parts of this plan will be delivered in a spirit of generosity but also in a spirit of humility and repentance: humility because the West's superior economic status does not imply a higher level of consciousness or moral worth, and repentance because of the destruction and impoverishment caused by advanced industrial societies in countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, and much of Africa and Central and South America.

Increases in material wealth have had a positive impact in reducing much of the suffering and discomfort of daily life, and advances in technology and science have provided access to huge amounts of knowledge that

could ultimately support the well-being of everyone on the planet and the planet itself. Yet we also recognize that science and technology have often served the values of materialism and selfishness to make killing easier and more effective, to design production methods that have been destructive to the environment and have threatened the survival of the planet and its species, and to enrich some while impoverishing many others. A sense of humility recognizes that many economically disadvantaged countries are home to flourishing spiritual and ethical wisdom that people in more developed industrial societies can learn from.

(7) An International Generosity Corps will be recruited from around the world; members will dedicate two years of their lives to assist in the implementation of the Global Marshall Plan.

(8) Job training and microfinancing of small private-sector enterprises will help the people at the local level to participate in the global economy without the need of foreign aid. The program aims to consciously transition local economies so that they can continue to be sustainable even when Global Marshall Plan support is no longer available.

EMBODYING OUR VALUES

The crux of the issue is this: Social change must come about by embodying the same values that the change is seeking to create.

One of those values must be a spirit of generosity and compassion toward ourselves and one another. The people involved in social change movements are as deeply flawed as anyone else on the planet. So instead of attending political gatherings with heightened expectations that here at last we will find the people who are redeemed and righteous in accord with the values we hold, we should expect there to be a gap between our principles and our own realization of

them. It's not just Eliot Spitzer (the recently disgraced New York governor) who turns out to be a flawed human being; we, too, are less fully developed than our ideals. Instead of beating up each other and ourselves for this gap, we need to develop a practice of self- and other-oriented compassion.

Similarly, we need to develop a practice of taking time for awe and wonder at the grandeur of creation. The Jewish world has done this by honoring the Sabbath. One 25-hour period a week (Friday night at sunset until after the stars come out on Saturday night), religious Jews stop doing anything connected to work, money, or advancement. We disconnect from our computers, televisions, and cell phones, stay out of our cars, resist cleaning the house or catching up with shopping, and devote this time to the celebration of nature, joy, and pleasure. We rest, make love, eat well, meditate, pray, study (but nothing goal-oriented or useful beyond learning for its own sake), and rejoice

in all that is good in our lives. It's a practice that all social change agents would benefit from. It's best on a Saturday or Sunday, and even better if you can share parts of it with others who have been similarly immersed in the pace and pressure of work and life in a materialist society and who are trying to change that model. Join the Network of Spiritual Progressives as we experiment with the best ways to build a movement for social change that has deep spiritual consciousness and aims to increase love and generosity on our planet. 🌍

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER is editor of *Tikkun* magazine, a benefit for those who join the inter-faith Network of Spiritual Progressives that Rabbi Lerner chairs (www.spiritualprogressives.org). He is also the rabbi of *Beyt Tikkun Synagogue-Without-Walls* in San Francisco and Berkeley, California (www.beyttikkun.org). Contact him at rabbilemer@tikkun.org.



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creativity and collaboration that created the European Union. Because the people involved avoided remaining in fixed, entrenched positions, they generated outcomes that far exceeded initial expectations or imagined results.

If we can embrace the meanings and experiences in both our internal and external worlds, melding the sacred and profane, we will be rigorously challenged to transform opposition into paradox. The essential task is to allow all sides of an issue, or pairs of opposites, to exist in equal dignity and worth until their hidden unity is revealed. This is our initiation into the embodiment of wisdom, the entry point into authentic spiritual maturation and personal transformation.

When we shift our perspective to look beyond dualities, opposites, and polarities, we can simultaneously consider many diverse options and possibilities without applying solutions that may seem quick, easy, and expedient but are in fact premature. In our later years, it becomes imperative to increase our capacity to hold creative tension, allowing far greater and more

inclusive solutions and options to emerge. By befriending and strengthening our capacity to hold paradox, we can explore the realm of deep spiritual growth. As we actualize all aspects of ourselves and weave them into an inherent symmetry and whole, we become more skillful problem solvers, mediators, stewards of justice, and models of patience and mercy. We become an unshakably wise presence that harnesses the good, true, and beautiful for the greater good of all concerned. This is wisdom's way and the primary task in the second half of life. 🌍

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ANGELES ARRIEN, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist, award-winning author, educator, and consultant to many organizations and businesses. She is the president of the Foundation for Cross-Cultural Education and Research and a trustee for the Fetzer Institute.

