

Cat's Teaching – Week 1

Spiritual Activism For Our Times

One of the things we learned through the research at the Institute of Labor and Mental Health is that the Left dismissed spirituality and religions. We are very concerned about is the way the Left deals with these issues and to be clear, we are not asking you or advocating for you to become spiritual or religious if that is not your inclination. The NSP is composed of people who are religious, spiritual but not religious, atheists and secular humanists who want nothing to do with religion – all are welcome here. And, it is important to understand some of the ways that the Left's position on these issues has undermined their effectiveness.

In the last two to three decades, the Left has chosen to draw a line in the sand between politics and religion or spirituality. Believing deeply in the separation of church and state and rightfully critical about the role religion has played in the oppression and exploitation of people for thousands of years, the Left is skeptical (at best) about religion or spirituality playing any role in politics. As a result, they have chosen to narrow their activist approaches to advocating for political rights and economic entitlements. Unlike the Right, the Left does not talk about or bring into the political discourse universal values grounded in spiritual teachings such as love, kindness, generosity, and care. When the Left uses terms such as 'justice,' they steep that term in political ideology, not spiritual or theological ideology. By relinquishing any hold on the questions of moral values to the Right, the Left strengthens the power of the Right to speak to people's need to live in a moral society, a society where they believe good conquers evil.

How the Right Claimed the Moral High Ground

In 2004 the GOP and conservative religious groups created the "I Vote Values" campaign. This bold move gave the GOP the mantelpiece they needed to claim that only they cared about morality. The fact that the morality about which they cared was narrowly focused to a few issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and stem cell research, did not undermine the power of the message.¹ The Left, with its angry anti-religious approach, was then and remains today unable and unwilling to tackle this issue head-on.

¹ Robert P. Jones *Progressives & Religious: How Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist Leaders Are Moving Beyond the Culture Wars and Transforming American Public Life* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008), 5.

This characterization of an angry, anti-religious Left was evident in the 2016 Democratic primary when Hillary supporters characterized Bernie as an angry liberal, a label that was then turned on Hillary in the general election. When asked about whether being Jewish informed his politics, instead of drawing on the wealth of radical teachings contained in the Jewish teachings, including the Torah's injunction to love the stranger, Sanders simply said that he learned a lot about how to treat others from the lessons of the Holocaust and from his mother. His politics, while undoubtedly embedded in values of love and justice, were articulated in terms of 'rights' and 'entitlements' not as fundamental values on which a society should be structured.

The Right continues to build on the message that they are the gatekeepers of morality (whether that is true or not!). The response of the Left is to simply reframe and challenge the narrow messages of the Right (for example, using the phrase 'anti-choice' in place of 'pro-life') rather than acknowledging the ethical conundrums that underlie some of the issues of the Right and, by focusing on narrow issues (such as, fracking) rather than putting forth a moral platform or vision of their own. In other words, imagine a democratic platform that began with the following preamble:

We, members of the Democratic Party, believe that all life is sacred. We see everyone human being as part of one humanity, all deserving of being treated with respect and dignity. We believe that a society should be judged successful not by how much money and profit it generates but rather by how much love and kindness, care and generosity, justice and peace, and awe of the universe it generates. These guiding principles will inform our positions and the policies that we promote.

This preamble offers an opportunity to engage with the difficult and rich questions of how to create policies and programs that embody the values articulated within it. If the Democratic Party started from this place, it would challenge the Republican's stronghold on the question of morality and force a public discussion on issues of meaning and purpose. Until that occurs, the Right can continue to claim the moral high ground.

The Right's claim of representing the "moral majority" has had a few consequences, including the fact that it has emboldened the angry, anti-religious Left to use this fact as one

more piece of evidence that religion is the problem. They throw out the baby with the bath water and along with that, many people who identify as religious or spiritual who may be inclined to support the Left if they changed their discourse. In a study of progressive grassroots religious activists in the 1990s, Stephen Hart summarized this dichotomy. “Progressives often fail to articulate, and sometimes even try to hide, the ethical values that ground their proposals. The right, meanwhile, engaging in discourse that is generally more passionate and transcendent, has seized the discursive high ground.”² He elaborated this point by explaining that these progressive activists act as if the following rules exist:

“Don’t talk about anything other than the practical steps of achieving the immediate goals the organization is trying for! Don’t bring up any basic values (religious or political) that underlie your commitment to the organization! Don’t ask anyone to articulate their reasons for participating in the group! Don’t talk in terms that engage people’s passion! Discuss issues in purely instrumental terms whenever possible!”³

This reluctance, even strong resistance, to bringing one’s faith or spirituality into politics ensures that those who identify with spiritual and religious traditions will continue to be vulnerable to manipulations of those beliefs by the Right. Limiting one’s discussion of political issues in purely instrumental terms is a manifestation of the embodiment of the values of scientific measurement and the capitalist marketplace within social justice efforts. Again, instrumental terms, however, are not inspiring. Narrowing its focus in this way, the Left yet again provides the Right the upper hand in using spiritual language to move people to action grounded in faith.

Fortunately there are more and more people on the Left embracing religious and spiritual values in their social justice work. They have done so because they have seen the need for political activism to be infused with spiritual values as a way to unify and consolidate efforts, occupy a moral space in contrast to that offered by the Right, and to reflect deep values that undergird the policies promoted, yet unarticulated, by the Left. While the Left is responding to these efforts by including interfaith contingencies at marches and call upon religious and spiritual organizations and communities to support or oppose legislation, they still fail to infuse

² Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2001), 20.

³ Hart, 15.

their message with basic values that underlie their work. This is so even though, if asked what values lead them to promote progressive proposals they would articulate basic values that reach across political divides. Their failure to explicitly articulate these values is one reason the Right continues to expand its base and the Left continues to lose ground.

Reclaiming the Moral High Ground - What A Spiritually Infused Movement Looks Like

It is not difficult to find consensus on some universal spiritual values that can guide the work of activists who strive to create a loving and just world. We at the Network of Spiritual Progressives have articulated one version of this in our New Bottom Line and our Path to a Loving and Just World. A New Bottom Line is one in which all our social, economic, and political systems are judged successful to the extent that they maximize love and kindness, care and generosity, compassion, social, economic and environmental justice, environmental sensitivity and sustainability, enhance our capacity to respond to each other as embodiments of the sacred and to the universe with awe, wonder and radical amazement (rather than as a resource from which we can extract to meet our wants), rather than the old bottom line that measures success to the extent the institutions and systems maximize money and power.

Integrating and infusing our movements and efforts with a recognition that our burning desire for a loving and just world has stirred hearts and actions across the generations, that there has been forward progress and setbacks, and that ultimately, (as Martin Luther King, Jr. said) “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” is what is at the heart of spiritual activism. Spiritual activism is about seeing the inevitable connection between our personal spiritual development and needs and the society in which we live. “Ultimately, one of the best ways to take care of our souls is to build a society that supports rather than undermines our highest moral and spiritual intuitions and inclinations.” (Rabbi Michael Lerner)

We at the NSP are trying to do our part to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice and we believe that working to develop long-term strategies is an important and missing link in the process of doing so. It is also what makes our work challenging. We stand in solidarity with those who are trying to address the piecemeal attacks that keep coming down the pipeline. They’ve been coming for decades and as wonderful as people are who have been trying to do that and as important those efforts have been, they are finding that their victories

are being overturned and they this is so because they didn't pay attention to building a new consciousness in this society. We are trying to create long-term systemic change and that requires a long-term strategy to change consciousness in our society. As I said above, the Right has been paying attention to that and has been very effective. That has been one of the huge deficits in the approach of the Left - they thought they could win each little battle without dealing with the big questions of what kind of society do people really want, what kind of society can and should we build, and how do we go about doing that. These were often dismissed as utopian or ideological or too intellectual or too grandiose or who has time for it when putting out every little fire when in reality only putting out 1/3 of the fires. All we need to think about right now is the barrage of attacks on the federal level from the Trump administration and Republican Congress as well as those on the local level. For every fire we manage to put-out (temporarily), they have many more coming down the pipeline.

That is not to say that the responses and efforts to resist all of these attacks are not important, they certainly are. And while we attempt to deal with them, we need to simultaneously win the minds and hearts of people to a different kind of world. We need to focus on a cultural and spiritual transformation of our society, not just economic entitlements and political rights. Because of the ongoing attacks of the Trump administration we feel huge pressures to respond to the immediate and real assaults on people's rights. But simply being reactive and only responding to the attacks makes us less effective. Yes, there are times when we absolutely have to be on the streets, and every time we do that, we should be simultaneously put forth the vision of a world based on a New Bottom Line.

We are just as devastated and horrified about Trump as you are, but the danger of Trump is not simply what he will do in these next 4 years, but the degree to which Trump-ism will reshape the political landscape. The ideas of Trump and other right-wing ideas will now have a huge boost not only from Trump but from all of the people he has brought in to positions of power and influence in our society and the obedient media that believing it must be "fair and balanced" and acknowledging that these are the people who now have power, will give them and their ideas more time. Obama did not bring in people who would articulate and defend a progressive worldview. On the contrary, he kept showing to the Right that he would

compromise with them and he appointed people in his Cabinet who had a worldview exactly opposite what those who supported had expected. This is why our role is so critical because there are very few in the Left who have learned that lesson from the election and are saying we have to build a whole new consciousness. Hillary is certainly not saying not and neither are the mainstream people in the Democratic party in positions of power. Instead what they are saying is that we have to fight and resist each new attack and while that's important and we support those efforts, that is not enough because we will not win the hearts and minds of people through those efforts. That is what makes our role unique and powerful. Our strategy is to first change the culture of the Left so that it begins to:

(1) recognize that changing consciousness is a central need to build a truly loving and just world.

(2) stop shaming and blaming people who are not yet with us.

(3) bring this additional consciousness of advocating for the vision of the world we want into resistant efforts and

(4) then, after we have transformed the Left, reaching out to people who were Trump voters or didn't bother to vote b/c so alienated by whole thing and speak to their needs in a way they've never heard spoken to by anyone on the Left.

This training is based on fundamental principle that people are ways that are contrary to some of their needs – namely their economic and in some instances even their security needs (e.g., for healthcare). We do not assume they are, in fact, irrational, self-destructive, or fundamentally racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, etc. Rather we want to ask ourselves what are the real needs they have that they are seeking to meet but have adopted strategies to meet them that will actually not meet those needs and in ways that are destructive and hurtful to themselves and others, and then develop ways to meet those needs with more strategies that actually meet more, if not all, of their needs.

The challenge is that people are not always aware of their deepest needs. The research we've done at the Institute of Labor and Mental Health helps us uncover what some of those needs are (and now this is being addressed in more mainstream society and by some on the Left who were not addressing it previously – Michelle Alexander, Van Jones, Gus Speth) –

namely needs to be understood, to have a sense of meaning and purpose in life, to be valued and respected, to have a sense of community and belonging. This is why learning to listen and speak empathically is an important component of this training. These are all critical needs that the Right speaks to in misguided and destructive ways – namely by creating an “Other” who is to blame for people’s pain and suffering, rather than addressing the real culprit that leads to the psycho-spiritual suffering in our society, namely the ethos of the capitalist marketplace with its message of meritocracy, that you have to look out for yourself, and that if you have not succeeded in life it is your own fault. Instead of tackling this larger issue, the Left focuses on trying to lessen the pain and suffering of the marketplace by advancing economic interests and political rights. We need to speak to people’s psychological and spiritual needs and put forth a vision of a worldview that embodies values of a loving, just, and sustainable world. That is what the NSP is doing. We are excited and thrilled that you to want that world too and have chosen to join us for this journey.