Additional Reflections from Week 2

I wanted to share some additional reflections that I have had since our call this week. I will discuss some of these on our call Sunday, Sept. 24th. Some of these reflections arose out of the chat that occurred during the call (and I want to be sure folks who are not able to see the chat during or after the call are aware of the conversations that are relevant to the large group) and others are in response to questions raised.

1. There was a discussion in the chat about Obama’s choice as President to compromise rather than to put forth a vision of the world he wanted (and a vision of the world that many people thought they were voting for when they elected him President). There was an exchange about how Obama was trained in community organizing and that in that role he learned to compromise and work across the line and political divide. In response to that I want to say a couple things.

   a. First, local community organizing, while important for many reasons, in and of itself is simply not enough. We will not end the destruction of the environment simply by local acts of recycling or even community-wide acts of recycling. The most powerful people in our society (a.k.a. “the 1% of the population that owns a vastly disproportionate amount of the wealth), through their entourage of opinion shapers in the educational system, media, think tanks, and officials whose campaigns they finance, encourage us to think that we can solve systemic problems through local solutions. Systemic problems need systemic solutions. Some of those will be addressed on a local level and some need to be addressed on a larger scale, nationally and globally. Local activism has a role to play in social transformation. Yet if not connected to larger systemic change, they can become an effective way to distract people from engaging in more visionary and systemic change. What is important is that we simultaneously explicitly connect those local efforts to a vision of the world we want—for example, by educating people in the local struggle about a larger vision of the world we want (for example, by articulating the New Bottom Line-NBL), and by engaging in consciousness raising of the kind we are doing in this training.

   b. The Right is very effective on all of these levels. They have done enormous work on building local capacity and implementing local changes, but that work has been deeply grounded in consciousness raising and in presenting a consistent worldview – one grounded in the belief that the marketplace will address the needs of society sufficiently and the government should play a very limited role in people’s lives (except for certain moral issues such as abortion, etc.). But even that position is consistent with their worldview because they believe moral values should be part of a political discussion whereas the Left does not and they frame it by saying that the government should not force them to have to do things that are against their morals or have their tax dollars or the government in anyway support or sanctify (through laws) things that go against their morals or values. Some people argue that their appeal is simply reducible to the desire of people to have more money in their pockets which would happen if taxes were
dramatically reduced, and that this is simply “human nature.” But we know that there are societies in Europe that have far higher taxes than in the U.S. and that the people elect candidates who vote for these taxes in order to provide adequate services and protections for people and the environment. One major reason that hasn’t happened here is precisely because of the unwillingness of liberal and progressive forces to fight for a comprehensive alternative to the dynamics of the competitive marketplace. For example, many working class people resent the taxes they pay that help the unemployed and the poor because eighty years after the New Deal and its subsequent refinements in piecemeal legislative actions, the poor are still poor, the unemployed and underemployed are still suffering and angry at the system that supposedly is benefiting them, and meanwhile working people have been paying taxes and things don’t seem to be getting better. If, for example, when Democrats had control of both houses of Congress and the presidency (e.g. 1961-69, 1993-95, and 2009-2011), they had passed Medicare for all, a living wage for all working people, a guaranteed income for those with no jobs, an end to mass incarceration of African Americans, a clear path to citizenship for undocumented workers, a generous program of child care and elder care and retirement funds, and a comprehensive plan to protect the environment, many people who resent their taxes today would have felt that those taxes were actually serving their interests. But when they instead kept on funding huge military budgets even when the Soviet Union collapsed and there was no obvious enemy, then the promise of eliminating or dramatically reducing taxes seems to make more sense to a lot of people who in any event feel that they are struggling to keep up with the cost of living and with the expectations of “the good life” that is sold to them daily on t.v. and in the media.

2. There was a conversation during the questions in which someone (I apologize but I cannot remember the name of the person) said that her experience in the movement was different than Rabbi Lerner’s and that she did not experience the Left to be hierarchical. She then said that perhaps his experience was different because she was in the women’s movement where collective decision-making prevailed and that maybe men on the Left were hierarchical. I have a couple responses to that.
   a. First, the critique I was putting forth of the Left did not have to do with its hierarchical nature per se. I was explaining that the Left has failed to address or speak to the psycho-spiritual crisis people are experiencing in their lives, that the Left is religiophobic (I understand some people have different experiences of this but this analysis is based on extensive years of interviews with people who were moving from the Left to the Right – this research is explained in greater detail in his book *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*, so this is not just his experience, this is the experience that hundreds of people shared with the researchers), and that the Left fails to articulate a vision of the world we want.
b. Second, and this is really a more important point, is that when we as a movement speak in generalities about a particular group of people or essentialize a particular group of people, in this instance, that men on the Left are hierarchical, we are doing exactly what we are trying to explain is problematic in our movement. I do not think that the speaker intended to say “all men are hierarchical [and therefore bad]” but that is the message that is often heard by people outside the liberal and progressive social change movements (and increasingly by people inside the movement who are tired of being demonized). So when we notice that a message such as that can be heard in that way, we need to be sure to point out the shortcoming of that analysis and way of talking. We need to build a broad-based movement that includes men, white people, women, LGBTQ people, Muslims, Jews, Christians, immigrants, religious people and secular-humanists, atheists, elders, young people, etc. In order to do that effectively, we need to be very mindful so as not to make generalizations about people having certain groups of people all having traits or characteristics that we dislike. Many people have argued that the male dominated Occupy movement was ineffective precisely because it was so anti-hierarchical that it couldn’t make decisions even about what they were for. Talking about all men being x, y, or z or all whites being a, b, or c is almost guaranteed to be both false and destructive because it will push away potential allies. In fact, it is the shaming and blaming of men and whites which has been a factor in pushing away people we badly need to be on our side—and so challenging that kind of thinking in the liberal and progressive world, without for a moment reducing our struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, etc., is one of the tasks that we must embrace if we want to beat the forces of reaction in this society.

c. Third, there was also a reflection that satire and comedy are an important form of release. To that I want to say that when satire and comedy are at the expense of someone else’s humanity or our capacity to see their humanity, then it does our movement more harm than good. When it leaves people feeling put down or insulted, it will only drive more and more people to the Right.

d. Finally, I say all of this because I desperately want us to be successful. I desperately want a world that is flowing with generosity, love, kindness, care. I want oppression and injustice to stop. I am deeply concerned that unless we change our discourse and are deeply mindful about how we express ourselves, in the midst of our pain, our hurts, our frustrations – all of which are completely valid – we will only drive more and more people into the open arms of the Right who are all too happy to embrace them, show them respect, show that they care, etc. Just because the Right ultimately does not actually deliver on these things in society as a whole, in other words through economic policies, is irrelevant. They are delivering on something much more important – a sense of community, of belonging, of being seen and understood, of being cared about (even if not actually in economic terms, cared for), etc.
3. Chat comment: I don’t think most people think they have no ethics or morals and might be insulted to be presented with the new bottom line as though it is something brand new.
   a. My response: I have not experienced people insulted to be presented with the NBL as though it is something new. Rather I have heard people resist it. Many people want a world based on a New Bottom Line but do not believe we can organize and structure our society based on a NBL. People often respond by saying, “that’s just not realistic.” Or, “How do you measure that?” The NBL is not about questioning people’s ethics or morals, it’s about saying that those morals and values should be guiding our economic, political, and social systems. And we know they are not guiding those systems because success is measured by money and power and not by ethics, values, and morals. And people believe it needs to be this way because (1) you have to have a quantitative way of measuring success and love, care, kindness, etc. are not quantitative, (2) because the law requires that businesses maximize profit for shareholders, and (3) because that is the way it is – the other way is just not “realistic.”