

Week 4 Notes

I want to re-emphasize that the skills we are teaching and the information and understanding we are sharing are very much grounded in a psycho-spiritual approach to social change. It is our belief that for us to build the world we want – of love and justice – we need to deepen our own capacities for empathy and compassion for ourselves and others and embrace the belief that we actually can create a very different world – one that seems completely unrealistic right now. So while some of the work these past weeks may seem unrelated to practical social justice work, it is in fact foundational to be able to build the world we want. Without this depth of understanding, self-awareness, self-compassion, and empathy for self and other, we will recreate patterns of oppression, struggle, and strife that we have not addressed within ourselves and that we are unaware of that are operating in our society as a whole. And I want to acknowledge that this approach to social justice brings up a lot of challenges for each of us because it touches upon our own pain and suffering, our mis-steps, and the ways that we integrated the ethos of the social order without fully realizing it. As a training for spiritual activists, I want to be sure to name that what we are doing is consciousness raising and sometimes consciousness raising is painful on a personal level. It is my hope that the self-empathy practice is a tool you are using when this arises for you and that you also seek out support from your buddies if possible. The other important component of this is that the best way to heal yourself is to simultaneously work to heal the world. As long as we live in social order that pits people against each other in a race to the bottom, none of us can fully embody our highest ideal of ourselves. What we are trying to do here is both/and – namely, not to focus all our energy on our personal transformation and also not to focus all our energy on social transformation, but rather to see that they are intricately connected and linked. To see that our personal liberation and transformation is inextricably bound up with the liberation and transformation of society as a whole. If you are finding this challenging, I am not surprised! It is challenging. And part of the training is to help you grow so that you can support others in personal and collective transformation as well.

Let's jump in now and begin with an explanation and discussion of how much capitalism impacts us personally, in our relationships, in our psyche, in the choices we make, in the ways we treat and respond to others, and in the systems and structures we create in our lives and then how we blame ourselves for not being to live up to the standards we believe we should based on the capitalist order.

To do this, I am going to start with an example or two and then I'm going to play for you a conversation Rabbi Lerner had with someone that illuminates this in a very powerful way. Many of us are now well aware of how patriarchy and racism, among other things, impact us personally and collectively. We see how the social order impacts our individual psyche and well-being. Before consciousness raising efforts on patriarchy and racism, to name two, people often felt like there was something wrong with them as individuals rather than with the society. The same is true for capitalism – we believe that there is something wrong with us for not succeeding as we'd like in one way or another, rather than looking at how the social order impacts and undermines our ability to manifest our fullest selves.

Let me give you an example: Imagine you have a child who is on disability and yet the income from disability is not enough to meet your child's need. And you do not have any additional resources to support your child. (This could also be an example of a child working a minimum wage job or anyway that a child needs genuine support and a parent is not able to provide such support.) Your child's need is real and the limits of your financial situation are also real. And yet often in situations such as this, the parent feels terrible because she or he cannot provide the additional support needed for the child and the child may even blame the parent for this – why didn't you work harder, make more money, save more, etc. As a result, a rift develops between parent and child and both blame themselves and sometimes one another. What is often not examined and analyzed in these interpersonal dynamics is the way that the social structure and order impacts personal lives and relationships so profoundly. There is a great deal of needs not adequately dealt with by our society as a whole. The failure of our society to provide adequate support for people, adequate financial support, adequate health care and support when someone is sick or in need, the willingness of our society to let people fall through the cracks - is transformed into a personal drama between a parent and child or between friends or partners, in which the child or the person is asking for more out of a genuine need and the parent or other person does not have more to give. This gap between what one has and what one genuinely needs is seen as individual problems to be solved by individuals and perhaps families (sometimes with the help of churches, etc.) rather than as a social problem to be solved by the collective whole of society. When you find yourself in a situation such as this, you feel so awful that you want to justify yourself to avoid the self-blaming and guilt you feel about not being able to deliver more. This happens in employment situations as well. A small company or organization has a health care plan that is very good, then someone gets diagnosed with a serious illness and needs to take time off. So the company gives the time off but after time (if

they comply with the federal law that would be 3 months) they can no longer hold the position open indefinitely because they need to make sure their office needs are met as well. So the small company or organization is trying to make-up for the lack of societal support in situations such as these instead of creating a society that is better equipped to meet these needs and can spread the impact of these needs across society as a whole.

And like alcoholism or any addiction, capitalism is a disease/sickness. They are driven by all sorts of biological, psychological and even spiritual issues/needs that push you to reach for your drug of choice. Gabor Mate, a Canadian psychotherapist and social theorist, explains that addictions arise out of basic fundamental needs that are profoundly and repeatedly unmet in our lives – namely needs for love, connection, belonging, acceptance, community. In a desperate effort to meet those needs, we go on FB, buy something new, etc. And yet these choices/addictions are killing us individually and collectively, and the planet too. And there are external forces pushing us to make those choices (advertisements, the social system/structure in which we live, belief in meritocracy, competition in schools/sports, belief that you have to push your kids so they will be successful, belief that kids are a commodity, we are all a commodity, etc.)

Facebook is a perfect example and manifestation of this. When someone posts on FB about how well one's child is doing, what is the impact of that on oneself, one's child and on others? There is so much pressure in our society to perform, do "well", be the "best", get into the best school, etc. How does this feed the capitalist ethos and ethos of meritocracy? And what is the impact of that on others who children may not be meeting those high standards? Does it lead to others thinking and feeling - my kids are not doing X, what's the matter with me or them?

This all ties into shaming and blaming which we have discussed quite a bit already. So part of what we need to recognize and reflect upon is the delicate balance between taking responsibility and self-blame. We want to take responsibility for our behaviors and mis-steps without beating ourselves up. This is the power of self-empathy (and in receiving empathy from others). In an empathically curious place, we are able to question why we behaved or responded or why we act in a particular way without blaming or shaming. By looking at our feelings and needs and deeply understanding what needs we were trying to meet, we are better able to see our patterns and to explore different strategies that will more fully meet all of our needs.

On a larger scale, we can see how what happened in Houston or previously in New Orleans is a consequence of capitalism - overbuilding without any plan or recognition of the consequences. And climate change as a result of taking and taking from the environment. Whether on a personal level or on a community level, capitalism and its consequences impact us in often unseen, yet powerful and negative ways. We want you to have the skills and ability to help people understand and see these connections. These challenges arise within social movements as well because we play this out in all areas of our lives.

The issue that then arises for us, when we are able to recognize that the way we are responding is part of the social conditioning we have from living in this particular social order, is to ask ourselves, "what is my responsibility then to change the system and until the system changes what is my responsibility to not allow the programming to adversely impact my behavior?" We need to recognize that it will impact our behavior and we need the skills to repair our relationships when there are breaks due to our social conditioning or for other reasons. We need to be able to see these connections and engage in efforts to overcome the conditioning, knowing that as long as we live in this social order we will never fully overcome these challenges. The pervasive societal impact, brainwashing of capitalism is an explanation for my weird, negative, or challenging behavior, etc. but it is not an excuse. Resistance and transformative social change work is not only campaigning to change the system or promoting how the world should be, but also making personal choices to not to act from this tendency that is operating in me (that is an act of resistance, pro-action, and transformation). Just as we can be aware of how the system of racism or patriarchy impacts us in many known and unknown ways, we have two responsibilities - one to change the system and two, to take responsibility and ownership for our mis-steps.