

After Empire

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered August 9, 2015

at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

How do we decide what's going to happen next? How do we decide what to do with our resources? Now, that's relatively easy when it's just you. You sit down and think it through. Maybe you make a list of positives and negatives for each choice you're making and see how it all adds up.

But it gets more complicated when more people get involved. Consider the transition from being single to being married, and all the changes this brings to how we decide things. And then, how do we negotiate the slippery slope when people want different things and no one can get all they want?

Consider this couple, Betty and Bob. They met in college, fell in love and got married soon after graduation. They began their careers, making the kind of choices young couples make. Where to live? What to do? What to eat and when? As long as it's just the two of them, they can work out a lot of these things on the fly. Where to live might involve balancing affordable rents with commuting times. What to do with your leisure might be a simple matter of Betty and Bob doing what they always did – maybe they liked to have coffee or drinks with their social circle – and then, when they find some new things they enjoy, they might naturally want to do the new things more and the old things less. If they're hungry after working late, they might just grab something on the way home, takeout, or order in.

But things have a way of getting more complicated than that. They're surprised when Betty gets pregnant but realize that the surprise is actually a wonderful opportunity because they both really want a child.

The baby comes, a girl they name Audrey. Audrey puts a strain on their lives, but, as new parents, they throw themselves into it. They're delighted and excited about each new change as she grows: walking, talking, laughing, singing, dancing, and so on. They're so excited about this that they decide to have another child. It's a boy this time, Aaron.

They're still committed and excited, but as things unfold it becomes more and more evident that Betty and Bob are using different criteria for making their

decisions, both about their children and their own time and resources. Bob is less willing to give up his old ways and begins to resent Betty's priorities, which he finds silly.

Betty wants natural and organic food for her children and, therefore, for the whole family. Bob, an inveterate fast food devotee, finds this annoying. Bob wants to keep seeing his old friends for drinks, leaving her alone at home with the kids, which Betty finds selfish.

You know where this kind of thing can lead. It escalates. Betty is irritated with Bob and Bob is getting fed up with Betty. The issues multiply until it's not just food, drink, and time, but extends into every part of their relationship. The tension increases until they both find it unbearable and, sadly, divorce, deciding on joint custody.

Does this resolve their issues and disagreements? They've got all the same problems now, but even less opportunity to work them through. Betty still wants the kids to eat wholesome, fresh, organic food. Bob often takes them to Burger King or McDonald's, which Audrey and Aaron love, and which, of course, drives Betty crazy.

Bob thinks he's looking out for the future of his children by saving money on food. He's setting it aside in a college fund.

Betty thinks he's poisoning their children and teaching them to indulge in harmful pleasures at fast food dives.

Things don't get better – they go downhill. Betty demanding and Bob pushing back; and Bob insisting and Betty forbidding. They push back and forth on their issues, over and over and over, each trying to have their way with the children.

But what about the kids? Audrey and Aaron have become pawns in this fight. They're caught between their parents in an ongoing power struggle. The parents, each believing in their vision of just how things ought to be, fail to notice that what they've actually given their children is the experience of being victims in an unending battle. If Betty and Bob were to really notice and appreciate Audrey and Aaron's deepest needs, they'd stop fighting and find a way to give them the steady affection and approval they need to grow into healthy, confident adults.

Betty, Bob, Audrey, and Aaron's situation can give us a little bit of insight into the nature of human behavior in situations other than family life as well. Is this

really so much different from the logic of the various colonial empires we've seen in the past five centuries?

When Western Europeans began traveling the globe they were puzzled at first by the great diversity of cultures they encountered. The puzzlement soon yielded to being troubled at what they saw as unenlightened squalor, leading to the development of the imperial concept of *noblesse oblige*, which is defined as the inferred responsibility of privileged people to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged.

I recently came across this anonymous story that puts this kind of thing in perspective. It begins, "One day a very wealthy father took his son on a trip to the country for the sole purpose of showing his son how it was to be poor. They spent a few days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

"After their return from the trip, the father asked his son how he liked the trip. 'It was great, Dad,' the son replied. 'Did you see how poor people can be?' the father asked. 'Oh Yeah,' said the son.

" 'So what did you learn from the trip?' asked the father. The son answered, 'I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon.

" 'We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others.

" 'We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.' The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, 'It showed me just how poor we really are.' "

And it concludes with the observation, "Sometimes it takes the perspective of a child to remind us what's important."

But, sadly, this perspective was as unavailable to Western civilization as it was to Betty and Bob. So these Europeans who saw themselves as privileged set out to share their advantages with the savages they were discovering. They saw these cultures as naïve societies lacking in the higher qualities that Europeans valued. This took the form of missions that taught Christian beliefs and morality, bringing

new forms of guilt and shame in the effort to change their values and modify their behavior.

Others saw opportunities for profit and advantage. They discovered they could exploit these people they thought of as lesser creatures, coercing them into productivity through domination or slavery. All justified, of course, by claiming that anything they brought into the wilderness was an improvement over what they found there.

These are the seeds of a self-justified empire impulse, colonizing and coercing people “for their own good,” without any self-awareness that they themselves are the actual beneficiaries both in terms of self-righteousness and economic advantage. The way this worked out in our history brought a quick and productive synergy between the civilizing and exploiting elements of the project, leading the colonizers to work together to do both, as they discovered that their version of Christian values provided a useful base for teaching the savages to be obedient to their new masters.

But, as we can see, almost no one in this enterprise was interested in seeing these new peoples, these “savages,” as genuine human beings with values and perspectives, inherently worthy of respect in their own right.

Again, we can see a parallel here between Betty and Bob and the Western European project of colonization and empire. Betty and Bob engaged in a power struggle over whose beliefs were the best, ignoring Audrey and Aaron’s real needs. Empires competed with each other to influence and control indigenous peoples wherever they could, remaining deaf and blind to the uniqueness of native history, culture, worth and dignity.

We often tell ourselves stories of how far we’ve come since the days of those empires, but how much have we really changed? We’re still arguing among ourselves, caught in power struggles about who is right and who is wrong. We’re still objectifying entire classes of people, pre-judging them on the basis of prejudices and calling it prudence.

Many of us long for a world that is more harmonious and loving, but tend to remain deaf and blind to our impulses and behaviors that having us taking part in the thwarting our own utopian dream.

The real issues beneath the issues we're looking at are structural, things deeply embedded in our human cultures. It's not a matter of "fix this," or "address that," it's far deeper. The issues that produce global warming and habitat depletion are as old as empire, and as new as Betty and Bob.

This can be good news if we see it as an opportunity. As we become aware of the consequences of our actions and the responsibility we bear for the state of our planet, more and more people are accepting the responsibility and its mandate for action and change. There's a lot that each of us can do to answer the call for a revolution in our values, choices, and priorities.

We can see that there are bigger issues involved than merely economic and ecological choices, issues of moral development that can lead to fundamental transformations of individuals, of groups, of societies, and of our world community.

David Korten sounded the call for this kind of transformation in his book, *The Great Turning: from empire to earth community*. He describes how our relationship with the earth mirrors our relationships with our fellow humans. He frames his discussion with stages of moral development as described by Lawrence Kohlberg and others. Korten points out that people approach relationships differently depending on which of five moral developmental stages they occupy.

He describes the first stage as the way a young child experiences the world, and calls it "magical consciousness." Limited in its ability to recognize the connection between actions of the self and future consequences, this consciousness depends on external figures – like parents – to make things magically right.

Korten calls the second stage "imperial consciousness." This normally appears around the age of six or seven, when the child develops a greater capacity to distinguish between real and imagined events and learns about cause and effect. There is an appreciation that others have their own points of view, which are helpful if you can use them to get what you want. At this stage, justice is punishment, and there is a limited ability to constrain emotional impulses.

You can see why Korten calls this stage Imperial, because in it each person constitutes an empire, just like that of Rome or England, or perhaps 21st century America. Empire sees the world in terms of opportunities for aggrandizement and gratification where good behavior is motivated more by a desire to improve one's

position, or to avoid being caught, than by any selfless concern for others or an internalized ethical code.

Korten calls his third stage, “socialized consciousness,” and it normally begins around eleven or twelve. Unfortunately, it is also the highest stage of moral development most people attain, and it tends to reflect the real values of our own culture. He describes this as bringing “a growing emotional intelligence and an extension of self-interest to that of a group.”

Like Imperial Consciousness, this stage sees morality as obedience to rules and justice as punishment. He continues, “The Socialized Consciousness constructs its identity through its primary reference groups, as defined by gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, political party, occupation, employer, and perhaps a favored sports team. It is commonly militantly protective of its own group and prone to take any criticism of it as a serious affront. . . . It is the consciousness of the Good Citizens, who have a ‘Small World’ view of reality defined by their immediate reference group, play by the existing rules, and expect a decent life in return. . . .”

These first three stages, then, dominate the civilized world, as cultures compete to dominate and exploit each other. These first three stages tend to see the earth the same way they see each other: as resources to be exploited.

Korten’s great insight is that revolution is impossible without evolution – the realization that a true revolution to a sustainable earth community requires a commensurate evolution in ethical values. As long as self-interest is the norm, as long as the lowest price is seen as an absolute virtue without consideration of its impact on the lives of others, as long as profit and convenience outweigh consideration of long-term environmental consequences, we will remain trapped in a declining spiral of ecological degradation. What we need is to transcend limited self-interest and ascend to higher levels of moral development.

And this is the great news. The challenge before us is not merely economic, technological, or ecological – it is fundamentally religious! A commitment to the principles outlined in *The Great Turning* entails a commitment to personal and cultural moral and ethical transformation.

Korten’s stages of Cultural and Spiritual Consciousness describe just such transformations. They lead, ultimately, to an understanding of the interdependence

of all life: that the Earth does not belong to us; that we belong to the Earth; that the interests of each person are as valuable as our own; that people and planets are not to be seen as means to an end – they are ends in themselves and must be appreciated and respected as such.

This is a fundamentally religious issue because it is based on our basic beliefs about the nature of the world – and it comes down to what and how we love – because our actions are always based more on what we love than what we think.

As we begin to find our way into this more expansive and generous way of being in the world, we could find that our own behavior changes, our relationships transform from influence to collaboration. The ancient wisdom holds true here: there's really no way to change the world without changing ourselves.

Are we appalled at the harsh ideological conflicts in the Mideast – or between our political parties? I invite you to reflect on Betty and Bob. Is the basis for their conflicts any more evolved? We are often caught up in ceaseless power struggles because we believe that our ideas are more important than the people, issues, or cultures around us.

Years ago, a professor of communications studies told me that the hallmark of a genuine conversation is that neither participant enters it knowing what they will believe when it's over. When we participate in a genuine encounter with another, we need to open ourselves to the possibility of change as much as we consider how we might change or influence the other.

This week I invite you to help to bring about the peaceful world we all long for by paying attention to your encounters with others, with your conversations and the decisions you reach. Ask yourself how often your true intention is to change someone else's mind – either about an idea or plan of action. This is important because it's the basic building block of the empire's way of functioning in the world. If we want change, we need ourselves to be part of the solution.

May it be so.