

**UUMA/CSW Worship Service
General Assembly, Boston, Massachusetts
Monday, June 30, 2003**

**We are the Boat, We are the Sea:
Interdependence and Economic Anti-Calvinism**

by Reverend David Herndon

Background: This sermon won the 2003 UUMA/CSW SAI Sermon Contest. The winner of this contest is awarded a cash prize and has the opportunity to deliver his or her sermon at General Assembly. Accordingly, Rev. David Herndon delivered his sermon at General Assembly on Monday, June 30, 2003.

My parents and I moved to a small college town in the Southern Appalachian mountains when I was twelve years old. We joined the local Unitarian Universalist church, I graduated from the local high school, and my parents still live there. Although I now live a few hours away, I still look forward to visiting that lovely place, enjoying the beauty and tranquility of the mountains.

In my experience, that small town was and still is a pleasant place to live. Aside from the natural beauty, crime is low, unemployment is low, the schools are good, the university offers many cultural events, traffic congestion is infrequent, and there are no slums or ghettos or challenging urban problems.

I became directly aware of how challenging those urban problems can be when I moved to a large city to prepare for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. My theological school was located in an area inhabited primarily by African-Americans who are mostly working class, poor, or even impoverished. These neighborhoods had once been inhabited by European-Americans who now lived in middle-class and upper middle-class suburbs. Having lived mostly in small college towns before arriving in this large city, I wondered how this had happened: Was it merely chance? Was it just luck that things turned out this way? Or was there a more systemic dynamic at work? In other words were these two contrasting social and economic

realities
somehow interdependent?

Consider this example of how social and economic realities can be interdependent.

Shortly

after my family moved to the Southern Appalachian region, I read a book entitled Night Comes

to the Cumberlands by Harry M. Caudill. Subtitled A Biography of a Depressed Area, this book recounted how the Southern Appalachian region was economically exploited by shrewd business

interests from the Northeast. Reading this book when I was thirteen, I certainly did not understand it well, but I still recall some parts of it quite vividly, and in recalling those passages,

I still experience the same feeling of unfairness that I felt when I first read the book.

Caudill

sets the stage with this description of what was happening in the 1870s: “Speculators in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, New York and other northern cities had become aware of the immense

stands of still virgin forest, and exploring geologists had begun to report the existence of vast

beds of bituminous coal underlying the timbered hills. In financial and industrial circles occasional talk was heard that railroads should be built into the region and its great wealth

of raw materials made available to the nation’s rapidly swelling industrial complex.” [1]

With

regard to the timber, Caudill notes that “huge numbers of the virgin trees began to pass into the

hands of the Eastern and Northern corporations. To the mountaineer a few hundred dollars had

always heretofore been a great fortune. . . . the mountaineer was without perspective and lacked the ability to comprehend the value of his possessions or to negotiate for their sale.” [2]

With regard to the coal, Caudill writes: “In the summer of 1885 gentlemen arrived in the county-seat towns for the purpose of buying tracts of minerals, leaving the surface of the land

in the ownership of the mountaineers who resided on it. The Eastern and Northern capitalists

selected for this mission were men of great guile and charm. They were courteous, pleasant, and wonderful storytellers. Their goal was to buy the minerals on a grand scale as cheaply as possible

and on terms so favorable to the purchasers as to grant them every desirable exploitive privilege,

while simultaneously leaving to the mountaineer an illusion of ownership and the continuing

responsibility for practically all the taxes which might be thereafter levied against the land.” [3]

And finally Caudill offers this image: “When the highland couple sat down at the kitchen table to sign the deed their guest had brought to them they were at an astounding disadvantage. On one side of the rude table sat an astute trader, more often than not a graduate of a fine college and a man experienced in the larger business world. He was thoroughly aware of the implications of the transaction and of the immense wealth which he was in the process of acquiring. Across the table on a puncheon bench sat a man and woman out of a different age. Still remarkably close to the frontier of a century before, neither of them possessed more than the rudiments of an education. Hardly more than 25 percent of such mineral deeds were signed by grantors who could so much as scrawl their names. . . . Unable to read the instrument or to read it only with much uncertainty, the sellers relied upon the agent for an explanation of its contents—contents which were to prove deadly to the welfare of generations of the mountaineer’s descendents.” [4]

With that history as background, here is how social and economic interdependence can work:

I now live in Northern city, home to some of the industrialists and corporations who surely would have purchased the cheap timber and coal so exploitatively extracted from the Southern Appalachian region that is close to my heart. I benefit from the fortunes amassed by the great industrialists: my family regularly visits a museum established by a great industrialist; as I drive to work I enjoy the beauty of park donated to the city by a great industrialist; I attended a university established with the fortunes of two great industrialists; the pipe organ in my church was given to the congregation by a great industrialist.

The African-American feminist theologian Katie Cannon has told this parable about interdependence: Many years ago, a world-renowned organist had come to a large city to present a concert in a great hall with a magnificent pipe organ. He entered the hall with a great air of self-importance, and the audience rose to its feet with enthusiastic applause.

He sat down at the organ bench to play, and every ear was ready. After each piece, the organist bowed again and again while the audience showered him with applause. At intermission, the organist went into a back room to relax. Sitting in the room with him was an old African-American man who was responsible for pumping air up through the bellows while the organist

played. The African-American man said, "I guess we did a pretty good job, didn't we?"
At
once the organist stood up and looked down with disdain upon the African-American
man. "How
dare you say 'we'? I have studied at the best European music schools; I have received
honorary
degrees from the best universities in America; I represent the greatest height of Western
culture;
people have come here tonight to hear me, and only me, not you!" And with that, the
organist
swept out of the room and back into the great hall. As he took his place at the organ
bench, the
audience burst into applause once again. Then the hall grew silent as the great organist
made
ready to play. He pressed the keys. Nothing happened. With a nod to the audience, he
tried
again. Again, nothing happened. He stretched out his arms and pressed the keys once
more.
But once again, nothing happened. The world-renowned organist just sat for a moment.
Members of the audience started whispering. With a stricken face, the organist indicated
to the
audience that he would return in just a moment. Striding into the back room, the organist
found
the African-American man still sitting where he had been when the organist had left
moments
before. The two men stared at one another. Then the organist said, "Please come with
me."
The African-American man stood up and together they walked out into the great hall.
The
audience was uncertain what was happening, but the organist said in a clear voice, "I
have a
confession to make this evening. For a long time, I have had the mistaken opinion that I
work
independently. But I have been wrong. I would like to introduce to you a man without
whom
this concert could not take place, a man who works the bellows and supplies the air for
the
organ." At first only a few members of the audience clapped, but then more and more
people
joined in. The second half of the concert took place as planned, and at the end of the
concert
the organist and the bellows-worker stood together in solidarity to receive the enthusiastic
appreciation of the audience.

Thus the organist was able to recognize that his life was interdependent with the life of
another.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said this about interdependence: “We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. . . . Did you ever stop to think that you can’t leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world? You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that’s handed to you by a Pacific islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that’s given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that’s poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that’s poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you’re desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that’s poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that’s given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half of the world.” [5]

Of course, international and interdependent economic relationships such as those noted by King have existed for many centuries: recall the Clipper ships, or the spice trade, or the silk route; but also recall the slave trade, or the exploitation of the Southern Appalachians, and realize in the recalling that the central question is whether these interdependent economic relationships are just. The economically challenged section of the city where I attended theological school may be interdependently related to the surrounding affluent suburbs, but is that interdependent relationship just? The industrial interests in Northern and Eastern cities may have been interdependently related with the people in the Southern Appalachians who supplied timber and coal and other natural resources, but was that interdependent relationship just? The organist may have been interdependently related with the bellows-worker, but was that interdependent relationship just?

As Unitarian Universalists, we have many theological resources to draw upon to address questions of justice in interdependent economic relationships. One of these comes from the Universalist side of our heritage. Universalists, who first organized themselves in New England

in the 1790s, objected to the theological system known as Calvinism, which was dominant throughout New England at the time. According to this system, some individuals were destined for salvation while others were destined for damnation. Humankind would be forever split into the fortunate and the unfortunate. The contrasting anti-Calvinist message of the Universalists was that all human beings would eventually be united into one great family with God in heaven: they proclaimed the unity of all souls. The Universalists rejected the Calvinist doctrine that humanity would be forever split into the fortunate and the unfortunate.

Inspired by the Social Gospel movement of the 1890s and 1900s, the Universalist theologian Clarence Skinner called for the application of the Universalist message to this world. In 1917, the Universalist General Convention adopted a Declaration of Social Principles that largely reflected Skinner's influence, if not his language. This Declaration called for: "First: An Economic Order which shall give to every human being an equal share in the common gifts of God, and in addition all that [they] shall earn by [their] own labor. Second: A Social Order in which there shall be equal rights for all, special privileges for none, the help of the strong for the weak until the weak become strong. Third: A Moral Order in which all human law and action shall be an expression of the moral order of the universe. Fourth: A Spiritual Order which shall build out of the growing lives of living men the growing temple of the living God." [6]

If the early Universalists had envisioned the world to come as one where no one was abandoned, where no one was forever cut off from God's love, where all shared a common destiny, the Universalism promoted by Clarence Skinner envisioned the world here and now as one where no one was abandoned, where no one was forever cut off from participation in the social and economic life of society, where all shared a common social and economic destiny.

Unitarian Universalists could make a worthwhile contribution applying this inclusive vision to the economic arrangements within our world today. The term I would use for this vision is “economic anti-Calvinism,” for it calls for a world undivided between the haves and the have-nots, a world where no one is economically cast away and abandoned, a world where no one is forever damned to economic hell.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism draw many of their ideals from the Enlightenment, but of course other streams of thought trace their origins back to the Enlightenment as well. For example, modern economic theory traces its origins to Adam Smith, whose monumental book The Wealth of Nations, published in 1776, called for free markets just as our religious ancestors called for free inquiry. Free markets have produced great economic efficiencies and great prosperity for many people. Adam Smith used the metaphor of the Invisible Hand to describe the mutually beneficial results that would synergistically occur when all individuals pursued only their own private economic interests. Although some would say that rising tides only lift all yachts, in general free markets have produced rising tides that have lifted many boats. Nevertheless, the operation of free markets has left many individuals impoverished: it is difficult to benefit from rising tides if you have never owned a boat, or you don’t know how to use a boat, or if your boat has been stolen. I respect free markets, but as a Unitarian Universalist, I also recognize that free markets alone may not be able to produce the just and inclusive economic arrangements envisioned and called for in our anti-Calvinist theological heritage.

The contemporary philosopher John Rawls consciously seeks to extend the moral principles of the Enlightenment into the present. In his book A Theory of Justice, Rawls writes: “Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a great good shared by others.” [7] Rawls expresses in philosophical language what our own Unitarian Universalist tradition—also rising from the Enlightenment—has expressed in theological

language. The song “The Touch of the Master’s Hand,” which we heard a few moments ago, uses a theological metaphor to convey our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The master violinist brought forth from the battered violin a beautiful melody that was not apparent to the auctioneer. And so it is with human beings as well: there is something inherently worthy about every human being, no matter how disadvantaged, that is not apparent in a strictly economic appraisal. Perhaps the humane touch of the Master’s Hand would make a worthwhile supplement to the economic efficiencies of the Invisible Hand. For if the work of the Invisible Hand ignores those who cannot find a way to participate in free markets, the touch of the Master’s Hand shows care and concern for each human being; if the work of the Invisible Hand consigns some individuals to economic hell, the touch of the Master’s Hand ensures that all persons are to be embraced by society; if the work of the Invisible Hand understands the worth of individuals to be assigned only by their economic value as producers and consumers of goods and services, the touch of the Master’s Hand designates each person as inherently worthy of justice and compassion.

What can we as Unitarian Universalists do to see our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person reflected in our public policy and our economic arrangements, to see the touch of the Master’s Hand humanize the work of the Invisible Hand? First of all, we can examine our own lives with more acute awareness of how we might be participating in exploitative economic relationships. We are connected in ways we cannot avoid or undo; our very selves are essentially relational, contextual, and interdependent. But interdependence is not the same as justice; interdependence is not the same as compassion. Perhaps one has invested for one’s retirement; perhaps one has invested for the education of one’s children. These are faultless goals; but one might become more acutely aware of how one’s choice of investments affects economic relationships. Are you investing in companies that make expensive athletic shoes while maintaining sweatshop working conditions? Sometimes we may be unaware

of how we participate in economic relationships that are neither just nor compassionate.

Second, we can recognize that what was once called economic liberalism is now called fiscal conservatism. Early economists such as Adam Smith called for more liberal economic policies:

this meant that markets would be free from inefficient constraints such as protective tariffs.

Nowadays fiscal conservatism is not so much motivated by a desire to remove inefficiencies from markets as it is to avoid any social responsibility on the part of the wealthy for those who are

economically disadvantaged and downtrodden. As Unitarian Universalists, we have for many years said to social conservatives: "Live and let live!" This has been our message over many

years with regard to the oppression, whether legal or social, of African-Americans, women, and

sexual minorities. But now we need to say to fiscal conservatives: "Live and help live!" As

Unitarian Universalists, we need to find our public message and our public voice in matters of

economic justice, as suggested by the Study/Action Issue entitled "Economic Globalization,"

which was adopted by the 2001 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

We need to proclaim a gospel of economic anti-Calvinism. Our vision of universal love and

respect for the worth and dignity of every individual can be applied to our economic arrangements and relationships: this vision is well worth sharing with a world all too often

guided simply by the Invisible Hand.

When I was in high school, I spent many hours walking in the woods near the home where my

parents and I lived. I loved the mountains and the trees, and I wondered what the land was like

before the big trees were all cut down. In her book [The Color Purple](#), Alice Walker writes about

"that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all." She continues: "I knew that if I cut

a tree, my arm would bleed." And as human beings, how much closer is our kinship with one

another than with the trees, beautiful as they are! To recognize and affirm our interdependence

is one step; the next step is to make our interdependence as just and compassionate as we can.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area*

(Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1962), p. 61.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

[5] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," in *A Testament of Hope: The*

Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by James M. Washington

(New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 254.

[6] *Clarence Skinner: Prophet of a New Universalism*, edited by Charles Howe (Boston: Skinner

House Books, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999), pp. 32-33.

[7] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard

University Press, 1999), p. 3.