

## Economic Justice for All

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Rev. Jim Sherblom

First Parish in Brookline

In the early 1990s, the Achuar, a small indigenous nation of 3,500 people occupying 2 million acres of pristine tropical rainforest in the Amazon basin, on the border between Ecuador and Peru, recognized that they had a problem. Big lumber companies, mining concerns and big oil companies were increasingly despoiling the Amazon rainforest, and even though this wasn't happening on their land, which is protected, the ill effects were carried downstream as they watched their world slowly die.

The Achuar began rescuing what they could when it came into their domain, and eventually they went upstream to see if they could stop what was killing their world. In their native language, *Pachamama* means the earth, the universe, everything, and all time—a pretty useful word. And so from their conversations with these corporations emerged the Pachamama Alliance, inviting all people to care for, understand and protect the earth.

I hate to be the one to say it, but the great scientific industrial dream of progress is dying. The question today is whether we can wake the dreamer in time to save the earth, and what chance we have of changing this dream into a healthy, sustainable, spiritually rich and just dream. The Pachamama Alliance is growing rapidly at the grassroots level around the world, offering a series of workshops designed to “Awaken the Dreamer,” change our dreams of progress, and then help us to stay awake.

The movement's mission statement is to “bring forth an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling, socially just human presence on this planet.” To do this, they seek to help us answer four key questions: Where are we? How did we get here? What is possible for the future? And where do we go from here? These are important questions as we engage our future on planet earth.

First Parish in Brookline is not beginning from a place of doing nothing, thank goodness, because our Social Action Council has already begun to educate us about the interconnected nature of our work on environmental sustainability, economic justice, and to deepen our spirituality and engagement within this community and with our neighbors broadly defined.

Thanks to the work of the First Parish Green Initiative, my wife and I lowered our ecological footprint from about eight times a sustainable level to about five times a sustainable level, a 35%

reduction of our personal burden on the planet—a beginning, but not nearly enough. I am sure many of you have done far more, but we are on our way to environmental sustainability.

And thank goodness most humans are already living at environmentally sustainable levels, so that we in the developed world must only lower our footprints to more reasonable levels, well below where they are today, to bring the world ecosystem back into some kind of balance. This is a deeply spiritual practice.

Robert Reich, former US Labor Secretary, tells us: “Most American families are worse off today than they were three decades ago. The Great Recession of 2008-2009 destroyed the value of their homes, undermined their savings, and too often left them without jobs. But even before the Great Recession began, most Americans had gained little from the economic expansion that began almost three decades before. Today, the Great Recession notwithstanding, the US economy is far larger than it was in 1980. But where has all the wealth gone? Mostly to the very top. The latest data shows that by 2007, America’s top 1% of earners received 23% of the nation’s total income—almost triple their 8% share in 1980.”

Sociologists tells us that within any given society, richer people tend on average to be healthier and happier than poorer people. Today America has the highest per capita income in the world, yet due to economic inequality, our average reported happiness and life expectancy is no higher than some nations with only a quarter of our average per capita income. Norway has a comparable national income per person, yet due to much better economic equality, Norwegian rate far better than Americans on all measures of health, social problems, child well being and happiness. It is time we took our economic inequality seriously in America, for the sake of our wealth, health and overall well being.

Our economic justice work is just beginning, but others have prepared the way for us. A recent Youth Conference, or Con, in Belmont was organized by SubUrban Justice, a group that engages teenagers in social economic transformation around issues of class, wealth and income. Cody Berman of our congregation has participated in some of their work, and now five of our youth have been deeply moved to this work as a result of that Youth Con.

SubUrban Justice is committed to transforming our suburban and urban communities by supporting youth to develop a social justice perspective, and empowering them with the leadership skills to make positive changes in their schools and communities. They have offered to train a team of four to five of our 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade youth for six weeks, 20 hours per week,

this summer, as long as we will support these youth in transformative work within our broader community when they return.

The need has never been greater. There are 100,000 homeless children in the Boston area, half under school age, and tens of thousands of their parents are the working poor, making too little to even rent a home. It's not that there is a shortage of housing in the Boston area; we have more square feet of housing per person than nearly anywhere else in the world, or at any time in history. But, due to zoning laws and our distribution of wealth, many have much more housing than they use while others have no housing at all.

As a congregation, we collect food and clothing for food pantries and shelters, and we advocate for change with the legislature, all of which is good, but we also must be the change that we advocate for. We could end homelessness and hunger in Boston forever if we simply focused on it.

The mayor of Boston recently announced a \$30 million initiative to cut in half the number of homeless in Boston by 2012. The non-profit United for a Fair Economy has begun to show us the way to bring about a just economy locally and nationally. UFE believes that "the financial crisis will worsen in the coming year, and our personal economic security and that of millions of our neighbors will further erode." They have proposed local Common Security Clubs to provide small group ministry to those facing economic hardship; groups that can learn together what is going on, provide support and mutual aid to each other, and press for social action to make the world more just.

Our own Dan Jones is facilitating creation of a Common Security Club here at First Parish. So here is another reason to sign up with Dan Jones today: The number of people living in extreme poverty worldwide, estimated at 1.4 billion in 2005 by the World Bank, is growing due to the rising cost of food, so that 140 million children in poorer countries are malnourished.

The United Nations believes that we richer countries can eradicate extreme poverty and hunger worldwide by 2015 if we could bring even a fraction of the money and attention to this need that we did to the most recent financial crisis. Two billion dollars, fairly distributed worldwide, could end homelessness and hunger for human beings on this planet. Of UN millennium goals to end poverty by the year 2015, this is No. 1.

Of course, all of this will be for naught if we cannot ensure environmental sustainability. The UN estimates that 1.6 billion humans have gained access to safe drinking water since 1990, but 1 billion people still do not have access to safe drinking water today, and 2.5 billion people lack basic sanitation services. Only 22% of the world's fisheries are sustainable, and the oceans are

dying. The UN says: “Climate change is intensifying disasters, including extreme weather events, storm surges, floods and droughts.”

It is not just the Achuar people who must go up river to end the industrial and corporate practices that are killing our world; we must all do the same. It is critical that humanity as a whole awakens from this dream of scientific industrial progress, which is rapidly turning into a nightmare; and, having awakened, the dreamer begins to weave a new dream “to bring forth an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling, socially just presence on this planet.” This is the dream we need.

So in the midst of such enormous need, why do we now celebrate and help to fund work of two small service trips to New Orleans and Guatemala? We don’t need to solve all the interconnected problems of the world by ourselves—that would be overwhelming. But we must do our share to connect with the needs of the wider world as well as our own.

Niine people from First Parish on the New Orleans trip spent time with hundreds of other volunteers in Camp Hope helping to rebuild the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, the poorest neighborhood in New Orleans, and the area most devastated by Katrina. This area housed 14,000 poor people before Katrina hit, of whom only about 3,500 have been able to return. They put down new flooring in one more house so a family could return home. They heard the stories of the people who lived through the horrors of Katrina and its aftermath. And, in the process, they were transformed.

Our pilgrims traveling to Guatemala are working through the nonprofit Common Hope to support students to get an education, while connecting us with people who live in very different socioeconomic conditions than we do. These trips provide both needed services for communities beyond our own neighborhood and small group experience for the participants from our community. They also help to lift the consciousness of our entire congregation about conditions in other communities around the world.

Leading up to the Guatemala trip, the team worked with our Religious Exploration community to pot plants and sell amaryllis bulbs to sponsor Dulce, an eight-year-old. The congregation contributed cloth and made quilts that will be given to families we are helping in Guatemala. This congregation has donated 60 pounds of school supplies and materials for the Guatemalan school children. This morning’s offering will help sponsor a student. This is about the interconnected nature of the world today.

We do yet more here at home, meeting urgent needs at St. Francis House, the Brookline Food Bank, and Renewal House, and tutoring and mentoring children of color in the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry program in Roxbury. Recently a group of young adults, including Greg Buckland of First Parish, have begun to form an intentional community and center for social justice organized around UU principles. They call it the Lucy Stone cooperative and seek to purchase an eight- to 12-bedroom house to create a multi-generational, multi-cultural cooperative home, as a center to act for economic justice, sustainability, and faithful living. They wish to create an intentional community to attempt to live into our collective future.

First Parish member Meg Coward is developing a dream of creating an organic farm in Massachusetts that can be a center bringing youth, adult retreats, and UU ministers on sabbatical into conscious living on the land, learning organic farming techniques, and re-grounding ourselves upon the actual ground of our being. Spirituality is at the core of all of our social justice work.

Meg, perhaps along with Sophia Johansson, may be ready later this year to lead this community in a series of classes around food justice and nutrition. This is an intergenerational journey that we travel intentionally with our youth, our young adults, our mature adults, and our elders, as we begin to help shape the dream that will be the future of humanity upon this planet earth.

This is a big, audacious undertaking: to awaken from the dying dream of scientific industrial progress and unrestrained capitalism, to a new dream of “bringing forth an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling, socially just human presence on this planet.” What the Achuar people mean by Pachamama is perhaps not so different from what we mean by Spirit of Life, ground of being, or even that for which we sometimes use the name God.

The Pachamama Alliance is beginning to transform our world. Indigenous cultures in South America tell a story of an ancient prophecy called the Eagle and the Condor. “The prophecy foretold an unbalance and tremendous conflict throughout the Americas from around 1500 to around 2000. During this time the eagle, representing the mental and materialistic, has driven the condor, representing the spiritual and heart-centered, almost to extinction. The eagle represents modern, technological world, and the people of the eagle developed their intellect at the expense of their heart. [We] have developed technology to an extraordinary level, bringing [us] material wealth beyond [our] wildest dreams. But [we] also find [ourselves] spiritually impoverished to [our] peril. The people of the condor represent the indigenous people living close to the land, with the heart and wisdom that come from being attuned to the natural world ... These people are spiritually rich but materially impoverished.”

According to this ancient prophecy, now is the time in the world's unfolding, when the eagle flies again with the condor, each making way for the other, soul answering to soul, restoring sustainability and balance to the earth once more. May it sound along the ages, and may we be a blessing to this great worldwide transformation.

I love you all dearly. Blessed Be, and Amen.