

# Tikkun

POLITICS + SPIRITUALITY + CULTURE

(tē·kūn) To heal, repair, and transform the world.

FALL 2013

A RELIGIOUS  
COUNTERCULTURE?

ANA LEVY-LYONS

page 16



**Identity Politics, Class Politics, and Spiritual Politics**

**HOW DO WE BUILD WORLD-TRANSFORMING COALITIONS?**



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Democratizing Wealth | Reflections on God and the Gender Binary  
A Revolution in Our Personal Lives | Global Scorching





Mouna Shartah tends to her son Mahmoud, a Free Syrian Army rebel who fled the war after sustaining severe wounds.

## THE DARK SIDE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

**T**he Syrian civil war among Alawites, Christians, Sunnis, and Shia. The Bosnian Genocide. The Rwandan Genocide. The struggle between Muslims and Hindus in Pakistan and India. The Ku Klux Klan's attacks on Blacks and Jews in the United States. How much bloodshed do we have to mention to show how strong attachments to a particular group identity can sometimes lead to bloody struggles among groups that might otherwise live in peace?

Jews were among the first to insist on an identity politics based on reparations for previous oppression, but in the process of creating our own state, we ended up oppressing the Palestinians. That tragic outcome of Zionism has led some to question if identity politics devoid of a universal commitment to social, environmental, and economic justice is a viable path in the twenty-first century.

In the United States, we don't usually use the term "identity politics" to describe the work of white supremacist groups, but in truth it is in situations like these—when dominant groups rally around their shared identity—that the dark side of identity-based action becomes apparent. If we focus on what is more conventionally understood to be identity politics—the nonviolent, issue-based campaigns of groups facing oppression and discrimination—we see many important gains but also a drawback: too often, separate identity groups in the United States have competed with each other for a larger portion of the pie, even as the 1 percent have increased their portion dramatically and built a military, security, and espionage apparatus capable of quashing most efforts to bring about a redistribution of power and wealth.

We at *Tikkun* and the Network of Spiritual Progressives seek to build a movement that both affirms the continuing need to end all forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia and that also puts a universal vision first. That's the point of our Global Marshall Plan ([tikkun.org/GMP](http://tikkun.org/GMP)) and our Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ([tikkun.org/ESRA](http://tikkun.org/ESRA)). Please read our Spiritual Covenant with America, join at [spiritualprogressives.org](http://spiritualprogressives.org), and spread these ideas by giving subscriptions to *Tikkun* to your friends and family ([tikkun.org/gift](http://tikkun.org/gift)). We are reclaiming the universal message—that our first task is the healing and transformation ("tikkun") of our world.

3 Letters

## EDITORIAL

### 5 Environmental Alert: Join Us in Making Revolutionary Changes to Save Life on Earth

*To avert global scorching, we need to get money out of politics, transform our relationship to nature, subordinate economic growth to environmental sanity, and develop a global spiritual consciousness.*

## POLITICS

### 7 It's Not Just Child's Play: Nature's Powerful Effect on Children's Well-Being | MARY E. GOMES

*Time in nature is more important than you may think. Some researchers say a short walk in a park is as potent as a typical dose of ADHD medication.*

### 10 Once Out of Nature: Life Beyond the Gender Binary | JOY LADIN

*Mutable, messy, and rich with artifice, gender is the language through which we define ourselves. Can our theologies absorb this truth?*

## RETHINKING RELIGION

### 13 Taking Back the Bible | MARK I. WALLACE

*Christian conservatives have hijacked the Bible to defend their views on homosexuality, abortion, and contraception. Let's take it back.*

### 16 Fierceness and Reverence: Building the Religious Counterculture | ANA LEVY-LYONS

*Religious progressives too often eschew bold engagement with life's complexities. Some things—like love and justice—are worth being extreme about.*

## IDENTITY | CLASS | SPIRITUAL POLITICS

PAGE 19

### 20 Identity Politics, Class Politics, Spiritual Politics:

The Need for a More Universalist Vision | MICHAEL LERNER

*A narrow focus on the oppression of identity groups has obscured the visions that might unite us by speaking to our common humanity.*

### 23 In Defense of Identity Politics | PAUL VON BLUM

*Liberals, Marxists, and conservatives malign identity politics, but it doesn't deserve this bad rep. Identity politics has greatly benefited our society.*

A Revolution in  
Our Personal Lives

page 49





## Online Exclusives

*Tikkun* is not just a print magazine — visit our blog at [tikkun.org/daily](http://tikkun.org/daily) and our web magazine site at [tikkun.org](http://tikkun.org). Each has content not found here. Our online magazine is an exciting supplement to the print magazine, and the daily blog brings in a range of voices and perspectives.

Visit [tikkun.org/fall2013](http://tikkun.org/fall2013) for online-only articles associated with this issue's special section on identity politics. Don't miss these lively contributions from Sam Fulwood, John Powell, Simran Jeet Singh and Prabhjot Singh, Timothy Villareal, and others.

## FALL 2013

### 26 Identity Politics Is Not Enough: Why the Left Needs Universalism to Survive | ELI ZARETSKY

*During struggles like Occupy, a consciousness oriented around solidarity emerges. It is in this consciousness that our collective power resides.*

### 29 Race, Class, and the Neoliberal Scourge | LESTER SPENCE

*We cannot subvert neoliberalism without fighting racism. Not convinced? Just look at the stereotypes invoked in attacks on taxation and welfare.*

### 31 Revolutionary Suicide: Risking Everything to Transform Society and Live Fully | LYNICE PINKARD

*Capitalism grew out of a very particular kind of identity politics: white supremacy. To dismantle these forces of domination, we need to quit identifying with them, even if that means giving up status, comfort, and security.*

### 36 The Caring Majority: Building a Coalition Around Domestic Workers' Rights | AI-JEN POO

*When nannies, housekeepers, and elder care workers join forces with the families who employ them, a powerful majority emerges.*

### 39 Resisting Post-Oppression Narratives | CHRISTIAN SUNDQUIST

*Why are post-racial and post-class discourses so common right now? Is it because we're unwilling to believe that democratic equality has not produced social equality in our society?*

### 41 Intersectional Politics: Recovering Our Interdependent Wholeness | NITIKA RAJ

*The transactional values of the for-profit world too often infect our attempts at social justice work. We need an analysis with a spiritual core.*

### 44 Our Issues Entwine: LGBTQ Aging and Economic Justice

ROBERT ESPINOZA

*LGBTQ aging issues make clear how identity and class politics overlap. Let's expand the definition of "family" used for Medicaid and paid family leave.*

### 47 Why Identity Group Work Strengthens Our Capacity for All Liberation Work | CHERIE R. BROWN

*Identity-based work can help us resist the Right's divide-and-conquer strategies and overcome the individualism that holds oppression in place.*

## CULTURE

### BOOKS

### 49 Where Is Home? A Revolution in Our Personal Lives

*Going Solo* by Eric Klinenberg, *The Outsourced Self* by Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The End of Men* by Hannah Rosin, and *Coming Apart* by Charles Murray  
Review by Harriet Fraad

### 52 Democratizing Wealth, Democratizing Power

*What Then Must We Do? Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution* by Gar Alperovitz | Review by Thad Williamson

### POETRY

### 72 Fall to Your Knees and Thank God for Your Eyesight by Billy Collins



# Readers Respond

## A NOTE ON LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We welcome your responses to our articles. Send letters to the editor to [letters@tikkun.org](mailto:letters@tikkun.org). Please remember, however, not to attribute to *Tikkun* views other than those expressed in our editorials. We email, post, and print many articles with which we have strong disagreements because that is what makes *Tikkun* a location for a true diversity of ideas. *Tikkun* reserves the right to edit your letters to fit available space in the magazine.

### MULTI-FAITH MARRIAGES

Donna Schaper's web article "Beyond Interfaith Marriages to Multi-faith Marriages" (viewable at [tikkun.org/multifaith-marriages](http://tikkun.org/multifaith-marriages)) is a worthy statement of options for married couples whose members identify with different faith or ethnic communities. I appreciate her terminology (i.e., multi-faith vs. interfaith) as it offers couples with equal strengths of faith identity a framework in which they can live in a growing, loving, and intimate marriage. But what of couples who do not believe in God but identify with their family and/or ethnic backgrounds? They are neither interfaith nor mixed-faith. I refer to such couples as simply "mixed."

As a congregational rabbi of thirty-three years, I recently changed my policy of not officiating at mixed marriages and told of my struggle and decision in my Rosh Hashanah sermon this past year ([tinyurl.com/clergystudy](http://tinyurl.com/clergystudy)). I will now officiate at many mixed marriages. Yet, as much as I respect, appreciate, and love many of my Christian and multi-ethnic congregants, I retain a strong interest in assuring both the continuity of the Jewish people and resisting religious syncretism.

I no longer require conversion to Judaism in order to officiate at a mixed marriage. In my opinion, however, it would be disrespectful of the other religious faith for me to officiate at a wedding in which one party is a religious Christian or religious Muslim. Though our faith traditions share much in common, they are also very different, and to suggest otherwise is dishonest and lacking in religious integrity. My other requirement before agreeing to officiate is that the couple will become part of the synagogue community and agree to raise their children as Jews.

Pastor Schaper effectively addresses ways in which mixed-faith couples can respect each other's differences while affirming their own identities. She does not address the challenges

in helping to fashion a religious identity of such a couple's children.

A person cannot be Christian and Jewish. One is Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Each of these great monotheistic faith traditions have developed different ways of understanding God and practicing their faiths over centuries, as well as different relationships to sacred literature, rules, laws, customs, traditions, ethics, rite, and ritual. To tell a child that he or she is both Christian and Jewish or any other combination is oxymoronic, disingenuous, ignorant of our respective religious traditions, and therefore lacking integrity.

Having said this, the mystics of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all point to the same ultimate reality. But, as light refracts through a prism and separates into the colors of the rainbow, so too does God's "word" refract through our different faith streams and then become manifest in practice, culture, and identity.

We can find inspiration in other streams, but we need to be able to choose which stream is our own. Informed choice results only after serious study of each tradition and its sacred literature, sustained religious practice and contemplation, and understanding of the historical development of our respective traditions. The great challenge of modernity is for individuals and communities to find clarity about who we are and who we are not while remaining open to new ideas.

—Rabbi John Rosove, *Los Angeles, CA*

### A SPIRITUAL WAY OF SEEING

I very much appreciated Peter Gabel's essay "A Spiritual Way of Seeing" in the Spring 2013 print issue of *Tikkun*. He expressed so clearly that we are animated either by the ethic of fulfillment through connection with others and all of life and the entire universe, or else by

fear motivating contraction into the false and inevitably temporary sense of security through alienation. He encouraged presence in relationship through perception of our commonality with others, and the rediscovery of spiritual kinship in the eyes of everyone. This is a loving affirmation, and sharing such a vision is an act of love itself. I received it with gratitude.

—Jonathan Klate, *Amherst, MA*

### CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE CROSS

Many people have responded to "The Death of Christianity," my article in the Fall 2012 print issue of *Tikkun*, by suggesting that what I really need to do is to find out more about Christian theology, so that I can think more as they do. But I'm not interested in theology. I'm interested in behavior, and the way that religion and spirituality influence good and bad conduct. I judge religion by its fruits, not its theology. Why? Because behavior is the test of religion and the best evidence for its true nature in the world that we all share. We can argue about what constitutes good behavior, but at least we're talking about something real.

Also important is the way religion influences our political and social ideas, because in a world in which power is increasingly brutal and exploitive, religion and spirituality must be translated into language appropriate to the defense of human rights. At present much organized religion in America tends to be irritating at best, and at worst evil to the core. The hijacking of mainstream Protestantism by conservative evangelicalism and the suppression of social-justice Catholicism by Republican bishops have made them worshippers of power and the most active (and dangerous) constituency within the Republican Party. Having lost much cultural power, they now seek political power. We must develop religion

## MORE LETTERS

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and spirituality that can effectively oppose these forces in the public square.

Religion is successful when it inspires kindness, cultural literacy, and a passionate love of justice. It is successful when it influences compassionate behavior and life-affirming social advocacy. Theology, on the other hand, happens entirely in the imagination. When separated from the behavior and social commitments of the believer, it is simply a way to avoid living in the real world and quickly becomes a toxic disease of the brain. Look to your behavior and your support of justice in society, and in them you will find the success or failure of your religion.

—Lawrence Swaim, *Napa, CA*



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*Embracing Israel/  
Palestine?*

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## Tikkun magazine is . . .

. . . a vehicle for spreading a new consciousness. We call it a spiritual progressive worldview. But what is that?

### What Do You Mean by “Spiritual”?

You can be spiritual and still be an atheist or agnostic. To be spiritual, you don’t have to believe in God or accept New Age versions of spirituality. You don’t need to give up science or your critical faculties. We use the word “spiritual” to describe all aspects of reality that cannot be subject to empirical verification or measurement: everything pertaining to ethics, aesthetics, music, art, philosophy, religion, poetry, literature, dance, love, generosity, and joy. We reject the notion that everything worthy of consideration to guide our personal lives and our economic and political arrangements must be measurable.

### What’s a Spiritual Progressive?

To be a spiritual progressive is to agree that our public institutions, corporations, government policies, laws, education system, health care system, legal system, and even many aspects of our personal lives should be judged “efficient, rational, or productive” to the extent that they maximize love, caring, generosity, and ethical and environmentally sustainable behavior. We call this our New Bottom Line.

Spiritual progressives seek to build “The Caring Society: Caring for Each Other and Caring for the Earth.” Our well-being depends upon the well-being of everyone else and also on the well-being of the planet itself. So we commit to an ethos of generosity, nonviolence, and radical amazement at the grandeur of all that is, and seek to build a global awareness of the unity of all being.

If you are willing to help promote this New Bottom Line for our society, you are a spiritual progressive. And if you are a spiritual progressive, we invite you to join our Network of Spiritual Progressives at [spiritualprogressives.org](http://spiritualprogressives.org).

# Tikkun

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# Environmental Alert

## Join Us in Making Revolutionary Changes to Save Life on Earth

**A**S THE OCEANS RISE to earth-destroying levels, the agricultural heartlands turn to desert, and the rate of skin cancer grows to match the rate of the common cold, future generations will look back on the early twenty-first century with a combination of curiosity and anger, asking, “What could the people of the earth have been thinking when they kept on doing what they had been doing for 150 years—ignoring all the warnings about humans’ contributions to the rapidly developing global scorching?”

The facts are well known. In the spring of 2013, the major media reported a clear scientific truth: the level of carbon in the air has reached 400 parts per million. Human beings have never lived under these conditions, and there is now more carbon dioxide in the air than at any other point in the last 800,000 years. Environmentalists predict that the earth will be at about 450 parts per million within another twenty to thirty years, and this will cause dramatic rises in sea levels around the world, obliterating many sea-level cities and possibly some sea-level countries.

### Disastrous Inaction

Yet instead of taking dramatic steps to avert the crisis, most of the world’s leaders have continued on with business as usual. The Obama administration is no exception: it has capitulated to the oil and gas industries, accepted fracking and other environmentally destructive policies, and worked to preserve the primacy of oil and gas. Some have argued that the global economy is so completely dependent on oil and gas that their absence could potentially cause a massive economic meltdown, fueling the rise of fascistic tendencies among the ruling elites. If this is the fear, then now is the time to talk honestly with the American public about dramatically reducing consumption, combating the immense power of the 1 percent, and preparing ourselves to counter the mainstream media’s obfuscations of the urgency of the coming crisis. Only Obama or the next president would be in a position to talk this honestly to Americans. Unfortunately there is no indication that Obama will do so, or that our political system is capable of giving credence to any candidate who is willing to speak honestly about the depth of the environmental crisis or about the sweeping changes needed in the United States and around the world to avert the crisis.



Unless we do something drastic, rising sea levels will obliterate cities across the globe. Here, signs on the sand show how quickly the sea is predicted to engulf Cottesloe Beach in Perth, Australia.

Indeed, the small percentage of people who do pay attention and worry about this development have largely given up on reversing global scorching (a term developed by our ally at the Shalom Center, Rabbi Arthur Waskow) and instead have been asking how we can live with it. Recognizing that the gas, coal, and oil industries are unwilling to give up the huge sums of money they’ve invested in fossil fuels and exploration for new reserves and that these industries will fight any attempt to replace them with a more planet-preserving environmental policy, many environmental theorists have become “realistic” and try instead to focus on micro-steps unlikely to avert macro-level devastation. The much-heralded agreements between the United States and China to reduce the levels of carbon emissions are, at least in regard to the United States and other market-driven countries, unlikely to produce the level of transformation needed.

To avert global scorching would require a global populous willing to change its consumption habits to reduce the amount of unnecessary or planet-destructive goods produced. It would also require a massive shift away from urban sprawl and toward the creation of livable cities in which people work close to where they live so that they can rely primarily on mass transit. We would need to build environmentally clean factories that reduce the carbon in the air, rather than

increasing it, and to more or less eliminate the production of beef, pork, and chicken, so that the acres of arable land now used to grow food for those animals may be converted in part into land to grow healthy vegetarian food for the world's hungry and in part into reforested lands whose trees absorb carbon dioxide. And we would need to reduce our family sizes to reverse population growth and work together to plan a global economy that prioritizes human needs rather than profits.

## Preconditions to Change

None of this can take place unless two conditions are met: the dramatic reduction of global inequalities and the rise of a new spiritual understanding of human priorities.

The dramatic reduction of global economic inequalities is necessary because there is no way that the wealthiest societies on the planet can effectively preach to the poorest societies about preserving the long-term health of the planet when people are starving to death. If people in the poorest societies can make money by cutting down rainforests or following other environmentally destructive paths, they will do so in order to save the lives of their families, just as some will feel forced to sell children into slavery or prostitution in order to get enough money to stave off starvation for other family members. That's why *Tikkun* and the Network of Spiritual Progressives' proposed Global Marshall Plan is step number one toward environmental rationality. Please download the full version at [tikkun.org/GMP](http://tikkun.org/GMP) and read it carefully.

Similarly, to avert global scorching, the capitalist assumptions of the Western world must give way to a new spiritual understanding of human priorities. The good life can no longer be defined by how much one is able to consume or how much power one is able to exercise over others. To avert environmental disaster, we must build a world in which progress is no longer measured by the quantity of new products developed for consumption. Instead, the focus must be on developing an inner life, on loving relationships with humans and animals, and on our ability to appreciate, preserve, and stand in awe of the natural world. Every institution and social practice must be judged to be efficient, rational, and productive to the extent that it maximizes our capacities to be loving, caring, generous, kind, ethically and ecologically sensitive, able to see other human beings as ends in themselves (rather than means to our own ends), and able to respond to the universe around us with awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the grandeur and mystery of all that is. We in the Network of Spiritual Progressives call this our "New Bottom Line."

## First Steps

An important step toward climate sanity is getting money out of politics and imposing democratic constraints on capital by passing something along the lines of the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ([tikkun.org/ESRA](http://tikkun.org/ESRA)). The ESRA may not pass soon,

but struggling for it can reshape public consciousness about what is worth fighting for. Couple that with a personal spiritual practice: commit to meditate or pray for twenty minutes each day, and observe a Sabbath day each week in which you disconnect from technology, money, shopping, and work of any kind and instead focus on celebrating nature, developing your inner life, and delving into pleasure (food, sex, music, reading, play, humor, etc.). This practice can strengthen a campaign for a Sabbatical Year, in which almost all work stops once every seven years (more about this biblical idea in a future issue of *Tikkun*). This will help people let go of the mania of consumption and the false idea that "unlimited growth" is necessary for a healthy economy. Yet another step is to seek democratic control over banking and insurance by supporting locally controlled banks and insurance companies with elected boards of directors. Meanwhile, move your money out of the major national banks to local credit unions and local banks.

To popularize and coordinate this strategy requires a new political party. The best way to build it: create a spiritual progressive caucus inside the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the Green Party, or whatever other party you are affiliated with, and seek to win majority control within it. Use these ideas as your platform—and use the attempt to build support for these ideas as the opportunity to reach a wider community with a spiritual progressive vision of the world we want to build. Then simultaneously run candidates outside your party to challenge the candidates of your current party who do not really embrace the New Bottom Line.

How will you find allies? Sign up for our upcoming Network of Spiritual Progressives activist training, "Building a Spiritually Progressive Social Change Movement": you can do so at [spiritualprogressives.org/training](http://spiritualprogressives.org/training). The training will take place in the San Francisco Bay Area over Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, Jan. 17-20, 2014. Or create a monthly or bimonthly discussion group focused on articles in *Tikkun*—we'll help you find people in your area who might be invited (contact [julie@tikkun.org](mailto:julie@tikkun.org))—and then eventually invite these people to help you get the Global Marshall Plan and the ESRA on the ballot as public initiatives or to push locally elected officials to endorse them.

We have to act now to save the planet. You can help by donating to enable us to hire national organizers, buying gift subscriptions to *Tikkun* ([tikkun.org/gift](http://tikkun.org/gift)) to spread the word to everyone you care about, and inviting friends, colleagues, and others to a monthly reading group focused on *Tikkun* articles. You can also help by urging congressional representatives and your state legislature reps, city council, local political party, professional organizations, unions, religious organizations, and civic organizations to publicly endorse the ESRA and the Global Marshall Plan. We can't do it without your active involvement. ■





A little slimy fun can go a long way: mounting evidence shows that contact with nature deeply affects children's emotional well-being and ability to focus. Here, a girl plays with algae in Vernonia, Oregon.

# It's Not Just Child's Play

## Nature's Powerful Effect on Children's Well-Being

BY MARY E. GOMES

**T**HESE DAYS, most discussions of nature focus on all that is going wrong: climate change, species extinction, toxic pollution, and other impending disasters. In the midst of this much-needed reflection, let us not forget our deep and intrinsic connection to the natural world—a bond that can motivate, sustain, and inform all our efforts. Nurturing children's connection to nature is one crucial step in our multifaceted struggle to save the planet, and in turn the solace of the natural world can also become a lifeline for many children.

Small children have an inherent attraction to nature. On a recent camping trip with my daughter, Cassidy, and her friend Julius, I witnessed this attraction in a vivid way. After a morning spent playing in and around playhouse-sized tree stumps and patiently watching banana slugs travel up their arms, Cassidy and Julius discovered a five-year-old's paradise: a shallow river beach covered with slimy, green algae. Just entering the phase of childhood where all things gross hold a deep fascination ("Yucky things are fun!" Cassidy explained), they sat themselves down in the water and delightfully spent

MARY E. GOMES is a professor of psychology at Sonoma State University in Northern California. Along with Theodore Roszak and Allen Kanner, she co-edited the anthology *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*.

Justin Larson



Safe outdoor play is hard to come by in urban settings, so hikes, camping trips, and other programs offered by regional parks, community organizations, and schools can become a lifeline. Here, a park ranger takes a school class on a nature walk.

the afternoon making algae pies and slime castles, finally stretching out in the water, faces to the sun, hair streaming out, covering themselves with the slippery goo.

Obviously, an entertaining and memorable afternoon. But we are just beginning to understand that this slimy fun also has deeper reverberations in children's lives. In 2005, the publication of Richard Louv's book *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* helped to seed a growing movement of psychologists, educators, parents, and researchers dedicated to deepening our understanding of children's need for nature and implementing this knowledge in tangible ways in our families, schools, and communities (see [childrenandnature.org](http://childrenandnature.org)). As a psychologist and a mother, I have followed with great interest the mounting evidence that contact with nature strengthens and supports children's attentional capacity, emotional well-being, creativity, and social relationships.

This knowledge comes none too soon. The present generation of children faces unprecedented levels of nature deprivation. From city children growing up without green spaces to techno-addicted suburbanites, young people today are increasingly growing up within human-created structures. For the past several generations, we have seen a steady shift away from unstructured outdoor play in the face of increased achievement pressure, parental worries about safety, and the onslaught of electronic technology. For example, a nationwide survey of eight-year-olds through eighteen-year-olds conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2009 found that young people were engaged with various forms of entertainment media for a staggering seven-and-a-half hours a day on average, a figure that does not include time spent with computers related to schoolwork or talking and texting on cell phones.

## Cognitive and Emotional Benefits of Time in Nature

At the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Andrea Faber Taylor and her colleagues have been uncovering nature's role in helping children focus their attention. Their studies focused on the children who need the most help: those suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The disorder affects approximately 3-7 percent of school-age children and is frequently treated by psychotropic drugs with significant side effects. In the first of a series of studies exploring nature as a "treatment," Taylor and her colleagues asked parents to nominate activities that seemed to improve or worsen their children's symptoms. Consistently, these parents listed activities that occurred in "green, outdoor settings" such as camping, hiking, and fishing as most helpful. On the other hand, indoor activities, such as watching television, doing homework, and playing video games tended to make symptoms worse. Then, parents were given a list of twenty-five after-school and weekend activities and asked to rate the effect of each activity on their children's abilities to stay focused, complete tasks, and follow directions. Parents rated their children as doing better after spending time in green outdoor settings (such as a park, a farm, or a green backyard) than in a built outdoor space (such as a parking lot, downtown area, or neighborhood space lacking greenery) or indoors.

In a later study, Taylor and Frances Kuo directly assessed children's ability to concentrate following a twenty-minute walk in the park. Seventeen seven-to-twelve-year-old children with ADHD were taken on a twenty-minute walk in either an urban park, a residential neighborhood, or a downtown city area. They were then given challenging puzzles to complete, so that they would experience some attentional fatigue. The findings were dramatic: children's ability to concentrate was demonstrably higher after walking

Steve Hillebrand, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



in the park than after walking elsewhere. In fact, the magnitude of the effect was comparable to that of a typical dose of ADHD medication.

Other studies on “attention restoration theory” show that time spent in nature benefits the attentional capacity of people without ADHD as well. Social psychologist Stephen Kaplan of the University of Michigan has documented the myriad ways that the demands of modern life fatigue adults’ attention, leaving us scattered, irritable, and impatient. Not surprisingly, nature is one of the most potent remedies for attentional fatigue: the inherent fascination that nature holds for us, along with the slower, unfragmented experience of time, allows a deep replenishment of the psyche.

Another study from the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory shows that even a view of trees and grass from an apartment window has a powerful effect on children. A 2002 study of low-income children at a public housing development in Chicago found that girls with window views of greenery had an increased ability to concentrate, control impulses, and delay gratification. The lack of such a connection for boys was possibly due to the greater time that girls spent playing in or near the home.

Engagement with nature has also been linked to a more general sense of psychological well-being in children. For example, environmental psychologists Nancy Wells and Gary Evans found that the presence of nature in the everyday lives of children in rural upstate New York (a view of nature from the house, plants in the yard, or plants in the house) contributed to their well-being in two ways. First, the children with an abundance of nature in their surroundings were described by their mothers as less distressed and as having a greater sense of self-worth. Second, children who experienced stressful life events such as moving from one home to another or being picked on by other children were less emotionally impacted by these events if they had access to nature.

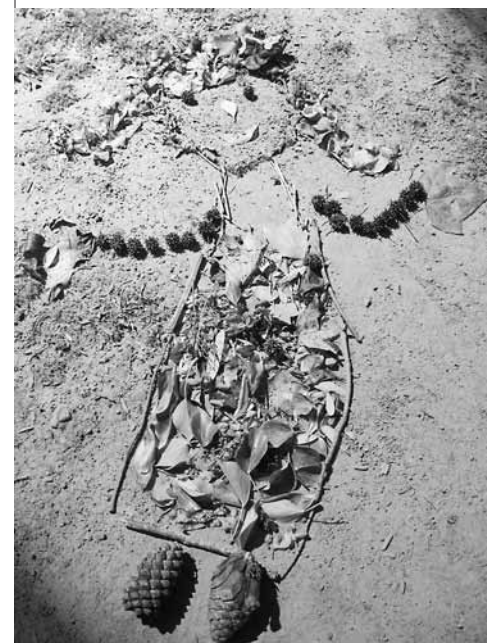
My ecopsychology students at Sonoma State University in Northern California often tell stories that reinforce this notion of nature as a buffer against trauma and stress. As a child, one student turned to a garden for refuge when parents were divorcing, and another escaped from a violent household to the embrace of a favorite tree. Often, the students credit their time in a natural setting with giving them the strength to endure difficulties. In nature they found an experience of unconditional acceptance, a time away from feeling criticized, judged, or pressured.

## Support for Imagination

Children’s imaginations and capacity for creativity also flourish in natural settings. Many social observers have lamented the loss of creative play resulting from shortened school recess, overscheduled and highly structured family lives, and the prevalence of toys linked to popular media. Nature, however, remains a vital source of nourishment for the imaginations of children. Plants, rocks, soil, water, and feathers seem to invite a kind of transformation in the minds of children, who turn them into everything from mundane objects (the rock becomes a telephone) to whimsical creations (the feather becomes a cape left behind by a fairy). In his classic study of “plants as play props,” landscape architect Robin Moore observed and spoke with five-to-eight-year-old children playing in a natural play area in Berkeley, California. One girl told him:

Whatever’s there, you can make something out of it. That’s what’s neat. If I see a branch that broke off a tree and it has a few leaves on it, I use it for a broom. When I find plants that are already picked or that fell from trees, I pretend to eat them at my campsite. . . . We collect seeds and plant them like a garden and pretend they’re going to grow. They don’t really, but they might. I wish they did.

In another classic study, designer Mary Ann Kirkby observed the outdoor play patterns of children in a Seattle preschool. She was particularly interested in the ways that children incorporated natural “refuges” into their play. Drawing on designer Jay Appleton’s theory that natural refuges offer a sense of protection from the dangers (*continued on page 55*)



“Mother Nature” smiles up from the ground in this imaginative portrait created by second graders. “Plants, rocks, soil, water, and feathers seem to invite a kind of transformation in the minds of children,” Gomes writes.



# Once Out of Nature

## Life Beyond the Gender Binary

BY JOY LADIN

**L**AST SUMMER, I promised myself that I wouldn't miss a sunset. I would set out on foot along my suburban street, toward the blaze of molten gold limning our small local mountain. I wasn't far from farmland. Half a mile away, a little-used dirt road threaded between fenced-off pastures and uninterested cows toward the purpling mountain. If I walked far enough, on the right hand side I'd come to a grass-fringed mudhole and startle two great blue herons.

This was nature, I would think, real nature, whose wings still beat in the mountain's lengthening shadow.

But was it? The herons were here only on account of the mudhole, and the mudhole was here to give domesticated cattle access to water. My decision to label part of the scene "real nature" was a romantic simplification of a muddy intersection of living systems, a projection of human categories onto the unsubdivided sprawl of life.

There's nothing natural about our notions of nature. "Nature" is a human category, a construct that reflects our longing to define the place in the universe we simultaneously inhabit and conceive. During my open-mouthed awe at the startled herons' flight, "nature" meant an order human beings may witness, protect, or despoil, but necessarily stand outside, because "nature" is defined in opposition to us. But oddly enough, the idea of "nature" also grounds our conceptions of humanity. People seem natural to us when they reflect what we oxymoronically call "human nature"—our sense of how people are and should be.

The artificiality of ideas of nature and human nature is old news to philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, and others who study human mind and culture. But what's

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Liz West (ewestphotos.com)



old news in academia is still a matter of life and death to people like me—people whose gender doesn't fit the “natural” binary categories of male and female. People who see us as “unnatural” have a tendency to ostracize us, fire us, kick us out of our homes, or verbally and physically assault us. But over my fifty-plus years as a transgender person—forty-five living as a man, the past six living as a woman—the worst harm I've suffered has come from self-inflicted wounds. Like many trans kids, I grew up tormented by my inability to understand myself in terms of “natural” categories of male and female. The combination of my male body and my unshakable sense of being female seemed, and still seems, to exile me from human and any other kind of nature. Even now, after years of living as a woman, my gender doesn't feel natural to me. My gender is a mudhole, a conscious, willful reshaping of both physical and human nature that cannot fit comfortably into either.

Like the herons' mudhole, in which the natural and the human intersect, my gender represents the collision of what logically ought to be mutually exclusive categories—male and female—and exposes the inadequacy of those categories. That, perhaps, is why some react so violently to people like me. We are mirrors in which they see the artificiality of the “natural” binary of male and female, its incompleteness, and the contradictions it conceals.

I understand that anger. I spent most of my life longing to be, as the song says, a natural woman. But the longer I live as my true self—as a woman whose every female X chromosome is invariably paired with a Y and who was born and bred male—the happier I am to live outside nature. I am what I am and I do what I do, without fretting about how what I am and do fits or conflicts with “natural” ideas about what a woman should be or do. It's cold outside the gender binary, but you can't beat the view of the gloriously category-confounding universe. And even when it's lonely, we aren't alone. The exploding universe we inhabit is filled by the God who, my Jewish tradition teaches, can be conceived only as that which is beyond human conception.

## A Mismatch Between Body and Soul

You don't have to be transgender or Jewish to see the limitations of nature. The unhappily aging speaker of W. B. Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium” declares:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress. . . .

....

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Like me, Yeats's speaker felt disgusted by the mismatch between body (Yeats's speaker calls his “a tattered coat upon a stick”) and soul. But Yeats's speaker went much further than I did, rejecting not only his “bodily form” but “nature” itself. In what someone somewhere has no doubt already identified as an early example of post-humanism, the speaker tells us he looks forward to spending eternity in “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/Of hammered gold and gold enamelling.” Becoming “artifice” rather than a “natural thing,” he believes, will enable him to sing of “what is past, or passing, or to come” without having to suffer through it.



“It's cold outside the gender binary, but you can't beat the view of the gloriously category-confounding universe,” Ladin writes. Artist Lauren Quock tears up dictionary pages to create these modified bathroom signs, which affirm queer and trans gender identities.



"The artifice of gender reassignment . . . enabled me, after forty-plus years, to finally see myself in the mirror," Ladin writes. *Toilette: Woman in Front of a Mirror* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Like Yeats's speaker, I looked forward to dying, to escaping the body that was doing such a bad job of reflecting my soul. Like many trans children, I occasionally tried to escape my body by killing it; unlike all too many trans kids, I wasn't good at suicide, and my body and I continued hurting and being hurt by each other into my mid-forties.

But unlike Yeats's speaker, I had a longing for death that was driven by despair rather than hope. I didn't want to escape nature—I wanted to fit into it, to have a body that would fit my female gender identity. If I couldn't live in a body that felt like mine, I didn't want to live. Around the age of eight, I discovered my first glimmer of hope that I could find my way into nature. One of my mother's magazines included a poignant maternal tale of a son's transformation into a daughter. Apparently, I wasn't the only one of my kind. In addition to males and females, humanity included people like me, transsexuals. (These days, transsexuals are recognized as one among many groups gathered within the category "transgender," an umbrella term that includes every relation to gender and identity more complicated than the "natural" binary of male and female.)

I knew that being transsexual wasn't the same as being male or female; nothing I'd ever heard about nature or human nature included people who were born as one sex but felt they truly were the other. For the author of the article in my mother's magazine, not fitting into the gender binary was a medical problem, and she and her child were grateful for the medical process, called "sex change" then and "gender reassignment" now, through which transsexuals can take what feels to us like our natural places in the gendered world.

## The Artifice of Gender Reassignment

Most non-trans people think of gender reassignment only in terms of genital surgery. But gender reassignment isn't genital reassignment. Few people express our own gender or recognize others' by comparing genitalia. Sex is physical and biological. Gender, as many have noted, is a language, an arbitrary collocation of public signs, such as hair length or handshake firmness, and private signifieds: the genitals within the clothing, the gender identity beneath the skin. Like other languages, gender is mutable, negotiable, historically and culturally contingent, a combination of individual idioms and long-established conventions that simultaneously serves as a medium of public expression and, as Teresa de Lauretis pointed out, a means of understanding and defining ourselves.

Gender reassignment isn't a medical intervention; it is a rearrangement of the language of gender that enables those who feel wrongly "assigned" to male or female identities by our bodies to express our true selves.

From the outside, gender reassignment can seem artificial, superficial, a silly insistence that the trivial nouns and verbs of gender—suits and skirts, tones of voice, arcs of arm and swings of hip, and, God help us, makeup—have existential importance. But Yeats considered artifice the ultimate expression of self (in "Sailing to Byzantium," artifice is one of eternity's main selling points), and when I began my gender reassignment, I realized how stunted my artifice-starved female gender identity was. My male persona was just that, a persona, a conscious attempt, driven by fear and shame, to look and act the way others wanted me to. Everything, from my personal taste to my morality, was a mask, a way of hiding who I really was. As a result, when I began living as my true self—as a woman—I couldn't answer basic questions about who I was, because I had spent my life avoiding them. Was I the kind of woman who wears scarves? Climbs mountains? Belly dances? Runs for public office? I didn't know. Like anyone learning a new language, I needed to master the basic nouns, verbs, and syntax of femininity, to learn how to dress, talk, and move through the world as a woman, before I could attempt any grander statement about who I was or wanted to be.

The artifice of gender reassignment, the changes in my physical appearance and social presentation, enabled me, after forty-plus years, to finally see myself in the mirror. But gender reassignment also enabled me to step outside the mirror, (*continued on page 56*)

# Taking Back the Bible

BY MARK I. WALLACE

**S**AME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS. Abortion. Contraception. All three are under attack by religious conservatives who say biblical teachings are on their side. Some faith-oriented Republicans think cultural warfare about social issues will doom their party to irrelevancy, but many values-based conservatives believe the soul of their party is at stake. For them it is crucial to battle social liberals in the public square lest the foundation of Western society, the traditional family, be undermined. And so religious conservatives' ongoing denunciations of marriage equality, equation of abortion with murder, and opposition to contraception on religious liberty grounds continue apace. Groups such as the Family Research Council and the Faith and Freedom Coalition—inheritors of the Moral Majority mantle—soldier on to defend traditional ideals of marriage and family in a shifting cultural landscape.

During the recent presidential election, Billy Graham was one of the many spokespeople for this position. Arguing that “there are profound moral issues at stake” in the election, the Rev. Graham urged readers to “vote for candidates who support the biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman, protect the sanctity of life, and defend our religious freedoms. The Bible speaks clearly on these important issues.”

Unfortunately for the Rev. Graham and other conservative Christians, however, the Bible says little, if anything, about the politically charged issues he and his ilk champion, and what it does say runs counter to their right-wing assumptions.

## The Question of Marriage

Ralph Reed of the Faith and Freedom Coalition says permitting same-sex marriage will “undermine the cultural good of the family unit.” Citing the Bible, he says marriage equality and family well-being are mutually exclusive. For Reed and others, the biblical ideal of marriage is exclusively monogamous and heterosexual, and any threat to this ideal destabilizes a cornerstone of civilized society. While right-wing Christians' one-man-one-woman paradigm is an important scriptural value—this model is upheld by the story of creation, some of Jesus's teachings, and the household rules for couples inspired by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament—the Bible also upholds the sanctity of polygamous relationships: the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and the great kings David and Solomon all had more than one wife. Moreover, Jesus and Paul, while valorizing monogamy at times, are also eager to champion celibacy, with Jesus highlighting the value of voluntary celibacy in the Gospel of Matthew, and Paul saying it is better to remain single than to marry in 1 Corinthians. Just as important, their lives spoke volumes on this issue: both Jesus and Paul were single, signaling, arguably, that this is the supreme



An anti-abortion protester brandishes a cross at abortion rights advocates during a “March for Life” in Ontario, Canada. Why is this a common sight, when the Bible says nothing about abortion?

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Two men exchange legally unrecognized wedding vows at the Episcopal Church of the Atonement in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. “The Bible contains no prohibitions against mutually affirming LGBT relations as practiced today,” Wallace writes.

ideal of the true believer. For Jesus and Paul, healthy living consists of freeing oneself of family entanglements and living the life of God’s obedient servant. The Bible, then, endorses three views of marriage—monogamy, multiple wives, and celibacy—assigning no preference to one model over and against any other.

My suspicion, however, is that conservatives’ defense of marriage is a stalking horse for a wider cultural argument about why homosexuality in general and marriage equality in particular are bad ideas. The Southern Baptist Convention and the Family Research Council’s public condemnation of the Boy Scouts of America’s recent decision to admit gay members makes this corollary argument clear. Standing strong for conventional marriage means that one is anti-gay and, by implication, opposed to marriage and civil unions for gays and lesbians.

So what does the Bible say about homosexuality? Unfortunately for right-wing Christians, even as the Bible is open-ended about what sort of marriage is desirable (or even whether marriage itself is desirable), it is even more open to the question of same-sex relationships. This is the bottom line: the Bible contains no prohibitions against mutually affirming LGBT relations as practiced today. Scattered comments against same-sex relations in the context of abusive Gentile practices are mentioned in the Bible, but these context-specific and historically bounded statements can hardly be used as justification for prohibiting all loving and committed gay and lesbian relationships today. Although Jesus is very specific about divorce (he categorically forbids it), he says nothing about homosexuality, even while the Bible itself is suffused with beautiful love stories between people of the same sex—Ruth and Naomi, for example, or David and Jonathan—that offer endearing portraits of LGBT-friendly affiliation that have endured for millennia. The Bible comes nowhere near denouncing homosocial relationships; in reality it provides the theological warrants for the very type of trust and mutuality that is at the heart of genuine LGBT relationships today. I suspect biblical traditionalists’ defense of marriage is a pretext for their real focus—slamming same-sex relations and gay marriage—but, paradoxically, this defense runs counter to the actual celebrations of same-sex relations within the sacred texts that they prize as the source of their moral crusades.

## Biblical Views on the Sanctity of Life

On the topic of abortion, Graham and his compatriots again say their goal is to “protect the sanctity of life,” arguing that every individual human person has inalienable worth, from the time of their conception until the moment of their last breath. In reality, however, the real concern of faith traditionalists is the legal practice of abortion in America. To “protect the sanctity of life” is code language for banning all types of abortion, even in cases, as the 2012 Republican platform made clear, where incest, rape, or the mother’s life are in question. Adherents of this view describe abortion as central to a “culture of death” that targets the fetus for destruction, supports stem cell research, and encourages assisted end-of-life decisions. They blame Planned Parenthood for spearheading this so-called death culture, a term they use, especially today, to draw connections between abortion and anti-female genocide. As the Family Research Council puts it, “Planned Parenthood has shown support for genocide. . . . [Its] affiliates in Texas, Arizona, New York City, Hawaii, and North Carolina [are] encouraging women to get sex-selection abortions for unborn girls they do not want.” This is a canard. Planned Parenthood does not encourage sex-selective abortions. But Christian conservatives use such charges to impugn the integrity of programs focused on women’s reproductive health choices and to make their point that abortion is the lynchpin of what they regard as America’s homicidal society.

So what does the Bible actually say about abortion? Absolutely nothing. The Bible says a lot about murder, infanticide, infertility, pregnancy, and child-rearing, and while it does contain a few allusions to or statements about miscarriage, it says nothing about the voluntary termination of a pregnancy. On the other hand, the Bible is very clear about

AP Photo/Mitch Jacobson

the sanctity of life. Because all of creation is made by God and filled with God's loving and abiding presence, everything that God has made is a bearer of inherent dignity and worth. The overarching framework of the biblical story is the goodness of creation, the inherent value of life, and the joy all beings share in being creatures that are made in God's image. The biblical perspective on the sacred character of life, therefore, is that because all of life is precious, human beings should be caretakers of the great garden of creation and protect this garden from the ravages of violence, pollution, and abuse—what the Bible calls sin.

As Paul says in the Book of Romans, creation itself is like a pregnant mother laboring and groaning to birth her child. Today, how can we help our groaning earth—our mother earth, as the Bible says—realize her mission to birth and care for all beings? The biblical answer is to promote works of love and justice wherever we can in order to nurture and protect life. In contemporary politics, this means Christians should support policies designed to save mother earth's climate system from the ravages of fossil fuel burning that causes global warming, stop the mad rush to war to solve conflicts with international neighbors, push legislation that bans assault weapons and handgun sales in order to break the cycle of violence, promote incarceration reform, outlaw capital punishment, and strengthen the social safety net. The Bible calls Christians to stop the slow death of millions of Americans (including children) from poverty, hunger, homelessness, and lack of access to education and health care. The implementation of all of these life-affirming policies would, in turn, lower the rate of abortions. These five political issues—climate change, war, gun control, detention reform, and the social safety net—are core moral and religious issues that no country with a conscience can ignore and still call itself, in biblical imagery, a light to the nations, one nation under God, a Christian nation. Only one of the two national political parties has taken up these biblical concerns as central to its national identity (and here there is much to be desired). Be this as it may, God is not a Democrat—or a Republican.

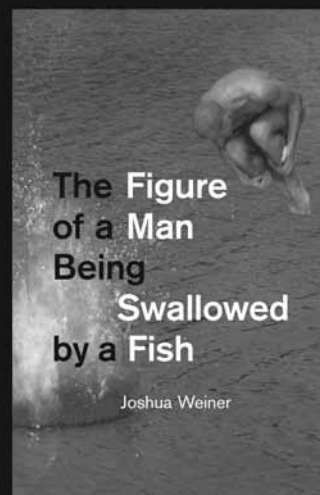
Many religious conservatives, however, have not followed biblical principles in their national agenda. Instead, they argue against climate change legislation, bang the drums of war regarding Iran, say no to sensible gun restrictions, champion a supermax prison system and capital punishment, and try to shred the safety net through privatization and voucher-like social reforms. If “sanctity of life,” in the manner of Billy Graham and his lot, applies only to abortion, about which the Bible is silent, and says nothing about environmental destruction, war, violence, poverty, prisoners, and caring for children and the sick—topics about which there are literally thousands of verses in the Bible—then how can religious traditionalists seriously claim to belong to the “biblical issues” party? Ironically, it is the other political party, the secular-immoral-and-against-the-Bible party, as pilloried by its conservative detractors, that is actually doing something akin to God's will in our time by working to save the planet, end violence, and strengthen civil society.

## Access to Contraception

The third main concern of the Religious Right has been contraception. Earlier in 2012, President Obama endorsed a provision in the 2010 Affordable Care Act that requires religious hospitals, charities, and schools to offer birth control coverage for their female employees. When the intent of this legislation became clear, religious conservatives objected that the provision undermined religious freedom on the grounds that employees would now be able to use subsidized contraception, even when such use conflicts with church teachings. Obama then mollified some of his critics by stipulating that while employees will retain their right to subsidized birth control coverage, the benefit will be paid for by insurance companies rather than by churches or other religious organizations. Whatever one's stance on this issue, it should be noted that the current administration is not saying that religiously affiliated employers should mandate or even encourage contraception, or that female employees should use contraception. *(continued on page 60)*



Contraception remains a major subject of right-wing Christian concern, even though the Bible itself says nothing on the topic. Here, a participant in a March 2012 Occupy Women's Rights rally in Minneapolis pushes back with some word play.



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# Fierceness and Reverence

## Building the Religious Counterculture

BY ANA LEVY-LYONS

**T**HE SQUIRREL WAVERED, teetering on a branch high above the heads of my friend Taryn and her husband James, who were enjoying a picnic lunch at a concert in Central Park. They noticed the squirrel and commented to each other that it looked . . . off, somehow. Maybe it was sick, maybe it was injured. They sat listening to the concert amid a happy crowd of other picnickers in the grass. It was a lovely day, the music was mellow, and the air smelled of sunscreen and good food. The city was out in full force, families and couples and friends sunning themselves with blankets spread out. The quintessential New York summer day.

Suddenly there was a dull *thud*, and everybody turned to see what it was. The squirrel had fallen from the tree and landed right in the middle of the crowd. You might assume that New Yorkers who can saunter past the “naked cowboy” in Times Square or nonchalantly report to work downtown after someone tries to blow up the Federal Reserve Building would be unfazed by the sudden airborne arrival of a squirrel. But no. Pandemonium ensued. People were screaming, running, scattering in all directions, parents shielding their children’s eyes as they dragged them away.

The squirrel lay writhing in the grass, clearly in pain, unable to drag itself any farther. James, who had grown up on a farm, knew what had to be done. He went and found a large rock. He came back to where the squirrel was lying. They made eye contact. He covered the squirrel with a plastic bag. He picked up the rock and euthanized the squirrel. The screams of the onlookers subsided to whispered awe—“What happened?” “Did he just kill that squirrel?” “Is it dead? Is it dead?” And people slowly came back and gathered around.

It is tempting to say that there are two kinds of people in the world: people like James and people like the retreating onlookers. But it’s probably more accurate to say that we each have two impulses within us—the impulse to engage with the challenges that drop out of the sky and the impulse to retreat. I fear that, all too often, the impulse to retreat wins. Many of us are squeamish or timid about matters much less grave than life or death. We can be timid about flouting convention, being impolite, seeming pushy, telling the truth, or changing direction after we’ve started down a certain road. We can be squeamish about getting our hands dirty in an awkward social situation, asking for something when we have already been told *no*, saying the wrong thing, making mistakes, or taking on that project that will make our lives messy and out of control. These are all ways that we tend to retreat a little bit from a full and bold engagement with life.

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Some of us religious progressives are especially wary of bold action because, having criticized traditional religion as dogmatic and heavy-handed, we know the dangers of hubris and loathe the overreach of power. We pride ourselves on seeing the multiple perspectives of every issue. We don't barrel through life, Rambo-like, running roughshod over people's feelings with no sense of nuance and no time for reflection on the meaning of it all. We are humble about all that we don't know. Compounding our reflexive wariness of certainty is a sense, stemming from the days of Martin Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses," that religion is an interior, private thing. In today's discourse in schools, the media, and even law, being religious is a matter of faith and belief; its personality is contemplative, gentle, quiet, apolitical, and sensitive to people's feelings above all.

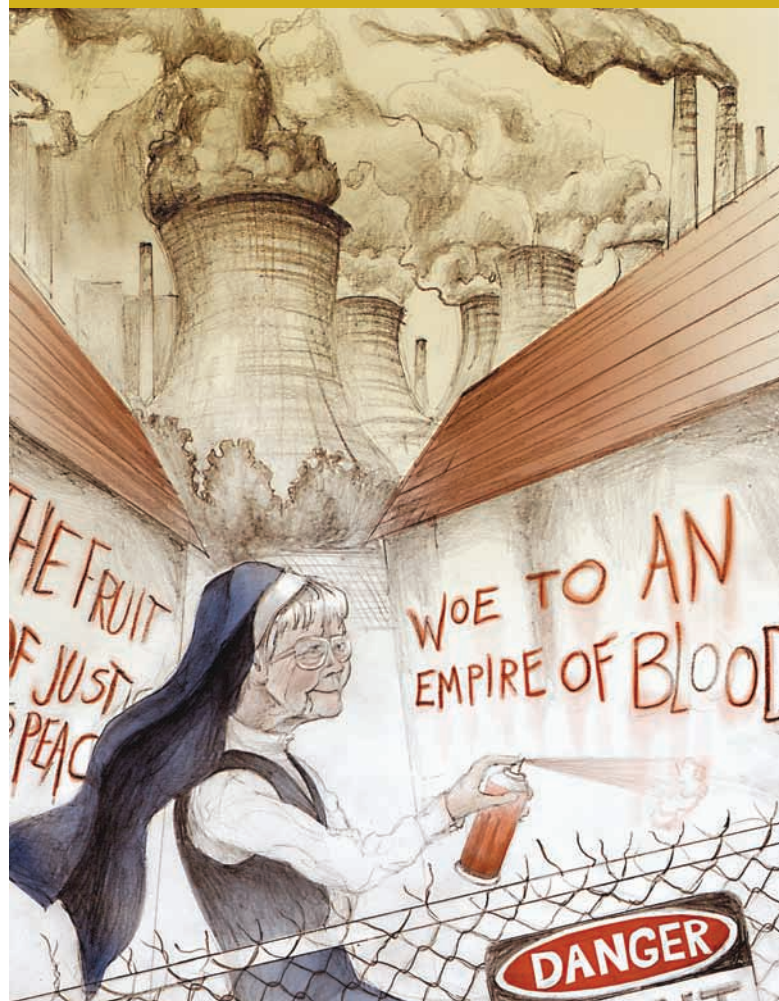
This portrayal of the religious life fatally undersells what religion can be and do in the world. To me, it is precisely because we are religious people that we are called upon to act boldly, not just in our private lives but in the public sphere as well. We are called upon to not shy away from life's complex decisions and demands, no matter how painful, how uncomfortable, how gory they may be. We are here to engage fully with the world. The essence of the religious life is to live fiercely and get messy in the service of the love and transformative power of one's faith.

## Religious Extremism

Every day, observant Jews will repeat the Sh'ma—the central proclamation of the oneness of God and the karmic relationship between what we sow and what we reap. In it we are enjoined to love Adonai our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and *b'chol m'odecha*. This is often translated as "with all your might" or "your mind," but really *m'odecha* stems from the Hebrew word *m'od*, which means "very" or "extremely." So a

After euthanizing the fallen squirrel, James lifted it in his hands, carried it across the field, and said a prayer over it. "It was the marriage of fierceness and reverence that made this a profoundly religious act," Levy-Lyons writes.





Why do we so often imagine religious people as delicate and sheltered, when in fact religion calls us to struggle fiercely against the militarism and materialism of modern culture? This drawing, *Woe to an Empire of Blood* by Laura Beckman, pays homage to Sister Megan Rice, the elderly nun who breached a high-security nuclear facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to spray-paint messages in protest of nuclear weapons.

ticated, delicate, and easily offended. Think of how nuns are caricatured in films. I am always fascinated by how often people will apologize to me as a clergy person for cursing in front of me. As if somehow a woman of the cloth leads a sheltered life, insulated from the hard edges of the world. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. (The truth, by the way, is just the opposite.) Religious people are supposed to be always reverent. And indeed it is reverence that distinguishes acts of boldness from acts of ego-driven violence. But reverence alone is not enough. Reverence must be paired with fierceness if we are to live out the moral imperatives of liberal religion.

Fierceness and reverence together is the most powerful brew that humans have ever concocted. Sometimes our faith requires us to drink this brew and become extremists. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously wrote on this point from the jail in Birmingham in a letter to the liberal clergy. These clergy were telling him to be patient and stop being so extreme in his demands. He wrote:

Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which . . . persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." . . . Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." . . . And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." . . . So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

The people that Rev. King cited are people who lived their faith with both fierceness and reverence. (*continued on page 60*)

better translation might be to love God "with all your very-ness." It tells us to crank up the amplitude on living our lives. There is no corner of our being that we should withhold from loving and engaging with the world. The Sh'ma goes on to say that we should speak of the radical nature of God day and night, outside and inside, teach it to our children and bind it to our bodies. If we do this and act in the world according to the teachings of our faith, blessings will flow for all living things. Reverence, as implicitly defined by the Sh'ma, *requires* boldness, fierceness, very-ness.

One of my pet peeves is the pejorative use of the term "religious extremism," which is usually reserved for terrorists and fundamentalists who use violence to control and oppress. To me, the problem with those labeled "religious extremists" is not their extremism but their understanding of religion. Killing people in order to terrorize is wrong, not because killing is extreme (which it is), but because it doesn't meet the criteria of "just war" or "self-defense." It is an expression of wrongheaded theology: terrorism will never reflect or promote a loving universe. This is fierceness without reverence. Fierceness without reverence is an untrammelled and selfish aggression, youthful self-aggrandizement indifferent to its effects. Look to the secular world, business, politics, and entertainment for an abundance of this brand of fierceness.

On the other hand, reverence without fierceness is impotence or even hypocrisy, a limp kind of faith that fades to obscurity. It's because of the prevalence of this brand of reverence today that religious people have developed a reputation for being domes-





# Identity Politics, Class Politics, Spiritual Politics

**How Do We Build  
World-Transforming  
Coalitions?**

Economic exploitation, racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, egoism, spiritual deadness, and the transactional quality of social relations under capitalism—there is so much the Left is struggling to overcome. Contributors to this special section debate the tensions and overlaps between identity politics, class politics, and spiritual politics. Don't miss the lively web-only articles on this topic: visit [tikkun.org/fall2013](http://tikkun.org/fall2013).





The Occupy movement struck a chord globally precisely because it transcended the sometimes polarizing effects of identity politics and articulated a class politics on behalf of the 99 percent, who are systematically disadvantaged by the class war waged by the ever richer and increasingly powerful 1 percent.

# Identity Politics, Class Politics, Spiritual Politics

## The Need for a More Universalist Vision

BY MICHAEL LERNER

**T**HE ELECTION AND REELECTION of Barack Obama seemed to many to be a moment of redemption for America's long history of slavery, segregation, and racism. And the powerful role that minority groups and women now play in elections seems to vindicate a dramatic turn by the Left in the past forty years toward a primary focus on identity politics, particularly highlighting the Left's efforts to counter certain forms of oppression faced by women, African Americans, LGBTQ people, Latinos, Asian Americans, immigrants, and people with disabilities.

Yet progressives and liberals have not yet fully grappled with the limitations of narrowly conceived struggles against identity-based oppression. For example, if struggles against the gender wage gap are framed narrowly in terms of "equal pay for equal work," such struggles are fundamentally unable to challenge the larger structure of capitalist domination that leaves millions of women and men unemployed, underemployed, or contending with multiple jobs that are still insufficient to pay for basic needs, not to mention the burdens of unwaged domestic work that continue to fall unevenly on

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Polis/Melissa Garcia Lamarca

women. Similarly, struggles against racism that are framed narrowly, such as efforts to end the employment discrimination that keeps people of color out of corporate, government, or media leadership positions, are insufficient to challenge the larger racist dynamics of mass incarceration and deportation that increasingly structure our society.

An overly narrow form of identity politics lacks the power to radically transform our society, in part because as more affluent or successful members of oppressed groups begin to achieve recognition of their rights in Western societies, they do not always identify with the needs of the most oppressed members of their own communities but instead sometimes take on the attitudes and orientations of the powerful.

To really transform our society and liberate ourselves from the capitalist ethos and transnational corporate rule that structure all of our lives, we need to listen harder and learn from those on the left who have found ways to combine identity politics with class politics and a call for a deep spiritual transformation of our society. Scholars and activists—particularly those whose identities expose them simultaneously to multiple interlocking oppressions, such as queer and working-class women of color—have spoken and written in powerful ways over the last few decades about how oppressions intersect and how we cannot liberate ourselves from racism or sexism without also challenging the fundamental economic and class structure in which we live. This is a moment when the Left as a whole is grappling with the question of how to bring together identity politics, class politics, and spiritual politics, whether we're working on a local, national, or global project. We need a vision and a discourse that speaks to our common humanity, even as we continue the multiple struggles to affirm and protect our many different identities.

Electing a Black president (or any electoral victory within the current system of money-dominated politics, for that matter) is not enough to significantly shift the interlocking forms of race and class oppression that shape our society. This should be clear from the way that President Obama, faced with the economic crisis of the past five years, has frequently given priority to the needs of Wall Street, the banks, the corporate elite, the “intelligence and security” oligopoly, and the military. It should also be clear from the way that the Democratic Party, often responsive to the identity politics of its base, seems unable to present a coherent worldview in opposition to that of those who believe that the capitalist market, with minor adjustments and occasional tweaks, is our ultimate salvation. It is ironic that our elected leaders are fearful of being accused of introducing “class warfare,” even though representatives of the 1 percent have successfully engaged in precisely that kind of warfare for the past thirty years at least, and a majority of Americans are doing worse economically than they have in forty years.

In this circumstance, there is a strong attraction—evidenced most recently by the Occupy movement—toward



What might the American Left accomplish if all our various identity groups came together in a powerful coalition? Here, activists from North Carolina sing together in protest of Republican lawmakers' attacks on Medicaid, unemployment insurance, and education and voting rights in May 2013.

renewing a revised class politics and focusing more attention on rallying the 99 percent and challenging the 1 percent. Yet it would be a big mistake to turn away from the revolutionary interventions made by oppressed populations in the past forty years. These gains must not be abandoned in the name of a return to class politics.

The determined reactionary minority that currently has control of the House of Representatives and the Supreme Court will continue pressing to undo or undermine gains made against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of identity-based violence and discrimination. Some press to undo these gains because of their greedy identification with the power and wealth that they have been able to achieve because of the racist, sexist, and homophobic societal and cultural arrangements that have disproportionately advantaged whites and men. Yet there are many middle-income and working-class people who get little benefit from the perpetuation of social inequalities but who nevertheless press against these gains because they fear any change and don't trust a Left that has shown so little sympathy for their lifestyle, religious commitments, and (media-inflated) fears and needs for security.

Because of the New Deal worldview's narrow focus on material subsistence alone, its revival would not be sufficient to rescue our society from its entanglement with capitalist ideology. We've attempted in *Tikkun* to articulate a spiritual progressive vision that affirms both identity and class, yet puts a greater emphasis on asking people to envision and nonviolently struggle for a society based on love, generosity, caring for the earth, caring for each other, and even awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe—values that are incompatible with the selfishness and materialism that are the underpinnings of global capitalism.

A spiritual progressive analysis reveals that the appeal of identity groups increases to the extent that they seem to provide an extension of the values of family life—a place where



one is accepted and validated simply because of one's membership in that group, not solely because of some achievement or accumulation of money or power—in a class society whose primary ideology encourages self-blaming (“if you are not part of the 1 percent, it's because you have failed in some aspect of your life to take advantage of the equal opportunity our society offers everyone”), which tends to be psychologically debilitating and deeply painful. The affirmations that “Black is beautiful” and that “Sisterhood is powerful” are exciting in part because they provide alternative forms of validation. Similarly, religious communities gain some of their contemporary appeal by affirming the self-worth of those within their community, even though this sometimes occurs at the expense of those outside that particular community. The downside, unfortunately, is that ruling elites have often been able to manipulate these various identity groups to struggle against each other and thus to deflect attention from our shared oppression of living in a class society with a radically unfair distribution of wealth.

It is our contention that the pervasive impact of class cannot be overcome simply by pointing out the injustice of the vast inequalities of wealth and income produced by the current class system, its inevitable militarism, its invasion of privacy, and its tendency to obliterate basic human rights in the name of security. Instead, we believe that a progressive movement needs to develop a “New Bottom Line” that assesses the efficiency, rationality, and productivity of our corporations, laws, government policies, economic system, political system, educational system, legal system, and even to some extent our personal behavior by asking how much they produce human beings capable of and likely to exhibit love and kindness; generosity and genuine caring for others; ethical and ecological sensitivity; and awe, wonder, and

radical amazement (as opposed to just utilitarian attitudes) at the grandeur and mystery of the universe.

To put that New Bottom Line at the center of a progressive politics is, in our estimation, both a deeper truth about what most human beings actually want and a more powerful way to challenge the globalization of selfishness and materialism that calls itself global capitalism. We've spelled out how to turn this perspective into concrete programs through our interfaith and secular-humanist-welcoming Network of Spiritual Progressives' Spiritual Covenant with America, Global Marshall Plan, and the “get money out of politics campaign” embodied in our proposed Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (ESRA). We hope you'll read about all three of these at [spiritualprogressives.org](http://spiritualprogressives.org). They are our first steps toward an approach to politics that includes and transcends both an identity politics and a class or anti-capitalist focus, even as it absorbs the important lessons to be learned by the movements that have embodied those forms of politics.

However, most of the people we invite to write in *Tikkun* do not share this perspective, and we use our pages not primarily to exhibit our view but to engage a wide variety of perspectives in our attempt to understand how to bring about *tikkun* (healing and transformation) of all societies distorted by the ethos of global capitalism. So in this issue, recognizing that tensions around issues of race and class, or between identity politics and a more universalistic frame for progressive politics, have been growing in the past years, we've invited a variety of thinkers to discuss their perspectives on how best to contribute to this healing and transformation of the world. In the following pages and in an online supplement to this special section (located at [tikkun.org/fall2013](http://tikkun.org/fall2013)), we begin to grapple with these issues. ■

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*City of Dreams/River of History*: a mural by Richard Wyatt and May Sun at Union Station in Los Angeles.

## In Defense of Identity Politics

BY PAUL VON BLUM

**C**ONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL critics have taken strong issue with identity politics, especially in the past few decades. Many of these critics downplay the ongoing violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism that continue to provoke identity-based organizing in the present day. I would like to offer some reflections on why identity politics movements strengthen rather than weaken the Left and why we all need to support identity-based organizing if we are to address the ongoing, dismal realities of racial exclusion and overt and institutional discrimination against historically oppressed populations.

Conservative critics often use “multiculturalism” as a synonym for “identity politics” in their line of attack. These conservative critics have maintained that a multicultural vision, especially in higher education, has led to an extreme fragmentation in society. They claim that programs and emphases on particular racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation groups can balkanize America and threaten Western culture and civilization.

Among the better-known critics have been the late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington (author of *The Clash of Civilizations*), right-wing ideologist Dinesh D’Souza (author of *Illiberal Education* and various other diatribes), and reactionary commentator Pat Buchanan (author of *Suicide of a Superpower*). The National Association of Scholars, a conservative academic organization, has likewise assaulted the recent academic focus on ethnic and women’s studies

programs and curricula, as well as on more general themes of race, gender, and class.

These conservative responses are sometimes sincere, but more often, they serve as verbal and rhetorical cover for their usual objectives: to preserve wealthy white privilege and power and to repress any dissenting voices that would challenge their domination. Many conservatives are well aware that contemporary groups representing minority racial and ethnic groups, gay and lesbian interests, and women present severe challenges to their power, especially when they are united in common political objectives. Their assault on multiculturalism and identity politics should be understood more in political than intellectual terms.

### Liberal Critiques of Identity Politics

Even traditional liberal voices, however, have been critical of modern identity politics. The late Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a former Harvard University historian, advisor to President John F. Kennedy, and a key member of the U.S. liberal establishment, offered a critique in his 1991 book, *The Disuniting of America*. Positioning himself as well situated because of his long-established liberal record and reputation to object to the new politics of identity, Schlesinger defended an older American idea of a “melting pot” or “American Creed.” He viewed identity politics as a phenomenon that would tear America apart rather than enable people of all backgrounds to assimilate into a uniquely American whole.

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Images of queer history and culture appear in this mural, *Pride and Progress*, which Ann Northrup painted on the side of the William Way LGBTQ Community Center in Philadelphia.



Like many other liberals, Schlesinger overstated the value (and even the existence) of the American melting pot, which historically excluded millions of its residents, especially those of color. The fragmentation he decried had long been a dominant, if under-recognized, reality in the United States. The racial and ethnic pride developments of the mid and late twentieth century, in fact, finally brought some substance to the otherwise empty rhetoric of American pluralism. The irony is that modern and contemporary identity politics alone can bridge the gap between historic American ideals and the realities of discrimination against historically oppressed populations.

I have often encountered this liberal resistance to identity politics in my numerous public presentations, often on African American cultural and political topics. Even among audiences inclined to favor civil rights and progressive anti-discrimination measures, some people have expressed concern and anxiety about even such terms as “African American.” Not infrequently, I have been questioned about why it is necessary to use such terminology instead of “just plain Americans.” As patiently as possible, I try to explain that “just plain Americans” may be well meaning, but it is ultimately an exclusionary category that has historically omitted many people who have only recently proclaimed pride in their identity, using language as well as other modes of expression to force the majority society to acknowledge their basic humanity. The deeper reality is that appeals to a grand American unity only exacerbate racial, class, gender, and sexual barriers and make genuine political change even more difficult to accomplish.

## Marxist Critiques of Identity Politics

A more perceptive critique of identity politics emerges from traditional leftist sources. Many critics from that tradition,

often representing a Marxist vision, maintain that identity politics ignores the class divisions of society. Some contend that identity politics entirely dismisses the element of social class conflict, which accordingly makes it even more difficult to work for a truly structural transformation of modern capitalist society.

These are serious allegations, and they contain substantial truth. My experience working with many individuals and groups associated with contemporary identity politics is that many are insufficiently aware of the Marxist critique of capitalism. Too often, they relegate social class to the margins—or worse—of their social and political criticism. As a teacher, I invite my students involved in identity-based organizing to inquire more deeply into social class issues and integrate those issues more fully into their efforts. I have had some modest but hardly overwhelming successes in this objective.

But at the same time, the Marxist/leftist critique of identity politics often relies on an outdated vision of American social reality. The working-class dynamics of several generations ago have changed considerably; many oppressed workers today are unlikely to understand their own plight and ironically act contrary to their own class interests, sometimes dramatically. Appeals to conservative working-class women and men to understand and act upon their authentic interests sound attractive, but in fact, today’s identity politics may well move them more vigorously to active political engagement. A reductive Marxist rhetoric can also retard social and political progress, although I should note, in fairness, that many leftist critics of identity politics in theory have nevertheless been strong supporters of civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, disability rights, and similar movements.

Ann Northrup/The Mural Arts Program of the City of Philadelphia © 2003 (Photo by Jack Ramsdale)



## Why Identity Politics Benefits Society as a Whole

To understand why the form of political vision and action described as identity politics constitutes a progressive development in post-1960s America, it's helpful to look at three seemingly unrelated events that occurred last year. Each of these events, which had extraordinarily different consequences and media exposure, reflected the sorts of political responses and efforts that have been too easily dismissed as sectarian identity politics. A closer review of these events—and the thousands like them—reveals why groups that have historically been marginalized in America have organized politically to the greater benefit of society as a whole.

The event with the most powerful national and international implications occurred on November 6, 2012, when President Barack Obama won reelection over Republican challenger Mitt Romney. Obama won in great part because he prevailed overwhelmingly among African Americans, Latinos, women, gays, and other oppressed groups who rejected the Republican Party's plutocratic (and often sexist, racist, and homophobic) vision that appealed to rich people and older white men. Each of the various oppressed identity groups, appropriately, had its own concerns and agendas, but Obama's more inclusive campaign persuaded all of them to vote for the nation's first African American president. The Republicans, meanwhile, alienated these groups by dismissing them as "special interests," while many older leftists saw them as narrow purveyors of identity politics. The longer history of identity politics in the United States made Democratic Party approaches to these specific groups more rhetorically appealing and politically effective.

Another recent event that placed identity politics in a broader perspective was the tragic killing of Jordan Davis on November 23, 2012, in Jacksonville, Florida. A middle-aged white male, Michael Dunn, shot and killed Davis, an African American seventeen-year-old, outside a convenience store after Davis and his friends refused to turn down their music in the store's parking lot. Eerily reminiscent of the Trayvon Martin killing in February 2012, also in Florida, this latest homicide of a young African American got limited national attention but galvanized black communities and activists throughout the nation.

The killing of Jordan Davis touched a nerve in the African American community because it reminded millions of the precarious existence of their young men, especially in gunhappy states like Florida. However, the killing barely evoked attention and concern among the remainder of the population. Even now, in 2013, mainstream discourse labels such events as the concerns of "special interests" (read: identity politics). Still, this killing has the potential to evoke political consciousness and action that transcend the needs of one specific group. In my personal contact with African American

academic colleagues and with African American artists, I noticed that this killing appeared to underscore their political consciousness in the wake of the national election. And in one dramatic example, the Davis tragedy helped persuade one African American victim of racial profiling to pursue his complaint more aggressively. All of this has wider, longer-term consequences for broader progressive mobilization.

The third event that placed identity politics in a broader perspective was the publication of two art reviews in the *New York Times*. In these reviews, art critic Ken Johnson offered commentary about two high-profile art exhibitions, one focusing on African American artists ("Now Dig This" at MoMA PS1 in New York) and the other on women artists ("The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making their World" at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia). In both reviews, Johnson suggested that the many African American and women artists represented in these exhibits had not received significant mainstream exposure not because of racism or sexism in the fine art world but because en masse, their work lacked artistic quality (in his opinion). His views echoed those of many other white men who repeatedly denigrate across the board the creative products of women and racial and ethnic minorities, thereby reinforcing the domination of white males in the art world and teaching art critics to participate in the marginalizing of minority artists.

Both exhibitions were curated with rigorous standards and included artists of extraordinarily high professional standing and accomplishment. But Johnson denigrated those accomplishments with comments like, "Black artists didn't invent assemblage. . . . Thanks to white artists like George Herms, Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz, assemblage was popular on the West Coast in the 1960s." No serious art historian denies the seminal influence of such iconic white artists. At the same time, it is long established that (*continued on page 61*)



Obama pays a surprise visit to the Boys and Girls Club of Cleveland in 2012. "Obama won in great part because he prevailed overwhelmingly among . . . oppressed groups who rejected the Republican Party's plutocratic (and often sexist, racist, and homophobic) vision," Blum writes.





A diverse coalition of identity groups came together to elect Obama, but once in office, the president hewed closely to the expectations of Washington establishment insiders such as Timothy Geithner and Gene Sperling (pictured here in the Oval Office).

# Identity Politics Is Not Enough

## Why the Left Needs Universalism to Survive

BY ELI ZARETSKY

**I**N THE HEBREW BIBLE, when God creates the universe, she doesn't simply reveal her work to the whole of humanity. She picks a particular people and gives them the burden of living with the knowledge that there is only one God. This sets them aside from all other peoples of their time, who believed that there were many gods, assigned to many peoples. Although God has not picked this people because of any superior traits, their experience of being chosen gives them a feeling of specialness, but it also makes them resented and even hated.

I tell this familiar story to indicate how fraught and complex the relation between particular identities and universal ideals has been. I think we can draw from the story two lessons relevant to understanding the stirring and powerful defense of what is normally called "identity politics" published by Paul Von Blum in this issue of *Tikkun*.

First, God doesn't make herself easy to discover. Rather, at least since the days of the Patriarch, she has been what Pascal called a "hidden God." The knowledge she represents

is extraordinarily valuable and can be acquired only through complex processes of reflection, not by attending to what is obviously the case.

Second, every identity is related to a universal idea. Some forms of identity recognize this relation, others deny it, but none escape it. And, contrariwise, universal ideas realize themselves only through particular cases, through what Kant called "the crooked timber of humanity."

Who cannot be moved by Von Blum's wonderful story? He speaks with passion as a white man who has been a leading figure in African American studies, a participant in the Civil Rights Movement who lived to see an African American president, and an intellectual who can see the commonalities in the oppression of women, gays, Asian Americans, Latinos, and disabled people. I appreciate how he sees the need to include a critique of social and economic inequality alongside his affirmation of identity politics.

Nonetheless, I think there is a better way to tell the story that Von Blum tells. Let me try to do so by taking up three

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White House/Pete Souza

fundamental moments in his essay: the Obama victory in 2012, the role of identity politics in the New Left, and the case of Paul Robeson, a great figure of the forties and fifties.

## How Occupy Wall Street Aided Obama's Reelection

According to Von Blum, the 2012 election demonstrates the political strength of the identity politics approach. No one who watched the TV coverage of the Democratic Convention would fail to agree that it was a marvelous demonstration of a party largely composed of female, gay, Latino, and African American delegates. Members of Obama's political team originally based their strategy on the theme of identity or, as they put it, demographics as opposed to economics. They portrayed the Republicans as waging war on women, as anti-immigrant, and as older fat-cat white men who don't understand how the country has changed.

These themes were powerful, and they certainly helped Obama, but there is good reason to think that had Obama restricted his campaign to them, he would have lost the election. Twelve to eighteen months before the election, Obama looked like a failed president. After all, he had failed to address the huge economic turning point that took place during his first term—the vast growth in inequality and the end of the “full employment” economy—presenting it as a mere economic downturn from which we could expect to “recover.” Even given the pathetic character of the Republican field, there was good reason to believe that the American people would turn to an alternative to Obama, not because of racism or sexism or homophobia, but because he had simply failed to address the central problem of his time: the patent failure of finance-led capitalism.

What saved Obama and made his 2012 victory potentially important was Occupy Wall Street, which invented the figure of the 1 percent and in doing so brought the language of class and inequality back into American politics. Slowly, and in his own cautious way, Obama took the language of Occupy Wall Street and refashioned his campaign around it. Eventually he was running a good old-fashioned populist campaign of the people against the wealthy elite. Of course, “the people” included groups (African Americans, women, gays, etc.), each of which was understood to have its special needs and contributions. But it also invoked a broader class-based identity that subsumed and transcended them all. Since his election Obama has continued to use this identity-group-surpassing class language. But it is doubtful that he will be able to act on these words, since he fell into the trap of placing the problem of the budget deficit at the center of his presidency when he took office in 2008, and it is very difficult to see how he can escape this self-inflicted wound.

Occupy Wall Street was not an example of identity politics. Rather, it was the expression of good old-fashioned

Marxist-derived leftism. It was effective because it took direct aim at what we all share—our participation in and subordination to the finance-driven capitalist system that organizes the modern world, bringing all governments, including the U.S. government, to their knees. Anyone who participated in the Occupy events knows that identity politics was intrinsic to them—in other words, problems of sexism, racism, homophobia, and so forth arose and had to be addressed *within* Occupy. But if it had not been for that marvelous eruption of a buried leftist consciousness, we might well have a Republican president today.

## The Universalist Spirit of the 1960s

Let me now turn to Von Blum's account of the 1960s. Quite rightly, he writes, “The African American freedom and liberation struggles of that era constituted one of the moral highlights of twentieth-century American history.” But he goes on to describe them as “an earlier manifestation of identity politics,” arguing that “without identity politics, the rebellious 1960s would have faded into historical insignificance.”

This account of the 1960s is, in my view, misleading. The consciousness of the great movements of the 1960s was not one of identity politics, but just the opposite: it was a consciousness based on the shattering of social identity and the reaching out at the deepest possible levels to achieve solidarity with people utterly unlike oneself. This was not only characteristic of the Civil Rights Movement, whose message was universalist and social democratic, but also of the student movements of the period. These were not based on “student power” or other inward-turned artifacts of the Seventies, but on the deep conviction that one could not be free while



“Occupy Wall Street was not an example of identity politics,” Zaretsky writes. “Rather, it was the expression of good old-fashioned Marxist-derived leftism.”



Is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s best understood as an early manifestation of identity politics or as a different sort of mobilization based on the shattering of social identity?



peasants in Vietnam were not free, or while black people in Mississippi were not free, or while women forced to resort to illegal abortions were not free.

## Fighting for One's Own Liberation

The identity politics that came to predominate in the Seventies had exactly the opposite spirit. It counterposed the fight against one's own oppression *against* what was perceived as the oppression of others. How are we to understand the emergence of identity politics in this sense? Some argue that it began with the Black Power movement of the 1960s, but this is at best a partial truth. When the cry for Black Power emerged in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s, there was a felt need among African Americans for a separate black organization and a corresponding emphasis on identity. However, at that point, the Civil Rights Movement was centrally concerned with class issues ("poverty") as well as with the incipient war in Vietnam, so there was a shared class politics that lay behind the wish to affirm a particular identity. Even more important, the African American community was not an ethnic community to be compared with other immigrant communities but was essentially a quasi-nation that had grown up in the United States through slavery and liberation, so that the insistence on a separate identity rested on a historical basis.

The true spirit of identity politics, a politics that contrasted one's own liberation to that of others, came with the women's movement, which erupted in the early Seventies. Anyone reading the literature of what was then called "women's liberation" will find statements like that of Cathy Cade, a lesbian documentary photographer who explained, "In the black movement I had been fighting for someone else's oppression and now there was a way that I could fight for my own freedom." In a similar vein, activist Mimi Feingold said,

"Women couldn't burn draft cards and couldn't go to jail so all they could do was to relate through their men and that seemed to me the most really demeaning kind of thing." And the feminist Combahee River Collective proclaimed, "The most profound and potentially the most radical politics come out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."

To be sure, there is continuity between Black Power and these statements by women of the Seventies. All oppressed peoples have to fight *directly* against their own oppression. As so many Jews have said, when I have been attacked as a Jew, I must respond as a Jew. This was the case for blacks, and it was the case for women. But there was an additional factor in women's liberation that gave it great force. Historically women had subordinated themselves to others, above all in their family life. They had sacrificed to make the Jewish community work, to give the socialist movement its ethos, to build the Civil Rights Movement in the South, and to support the draft-age men who refused to fight in Vietnam. The women's liberation movement was a way of saying that women would not do this anymore. It was unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable, that it presented fighting for oneself and fighting for others as either/or alternatives, rather than as complementary. The spirit that one has to be "for oneself" is the spirit not only of identity politics but also of neoliberal economics, and these two world-shaping forces have been inextricable bedmates from the 1970s to this day.

Von Blum might respond by saying that I miss the point in that the different stigmatized identities (women, gays, African Americans, Latinos, and so forth) have bonded with one another to form a new universal coalition based on multiple identities, but I have seen very little evidence of this—although much exhortation. What I have seen is quite familiar to an American historian: a (*continued on page 63*)

Steve Schapiro



# Race, Class, and the Neoliberal Scourge

BY LESTER SPENCE

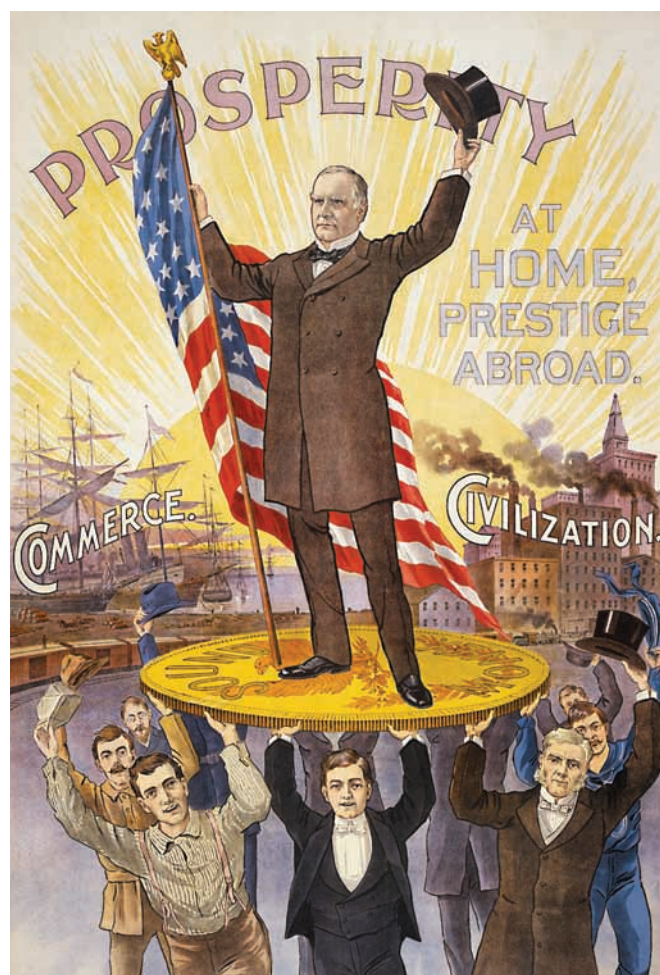
**N**EOLIBERALISM, the broad set of ideas positing the market and market-centered values as the ultimate “civilizing” agent at home and abroad, has now structured our society for forty years. Ever since it began its gradual ascendancy in 1973, we have experienced a marked increase in income inequality, witnessed the slow death of the labor union movement, and keenly felt a growing sense of anxiety. The task of the American Left has never been simpler and clearer—it’s to reconstitute the very idea of the public, in the hope that this reconstitution will generate a large-scale movement against neoliberalism.

As they seek to put flesh on the bones of this anti-neoliberal project, some point to the worsening of economic inequalities following Obama’s election (and reelection) in arguing we should turn away from identity politics and back to class politics, this time with a spiritually informed base.

I disagree. Race plays a prominent role in two aspects of the neoliberal turn—the rollback of progressive taxes and the rollback of welfare. We do need a more spiritually informed politics, but given how important the local terrain is in our political struggle, we need to understand the way “identity” and “class” politics come together.

## Neoliberal Attacks on Taxes and Welfare

The modern anti-tax movement began in California in 1978 with the passage of Prop 13. The proposition capped property taxes and made it impossible to pass tax increases in the state legislature without the support of a supermajority of state legislators. Prop 13 significantly reduced the revenue local governments need to provide public services and to educate public school students from kindergarten to graduate school. Two scholars, David Sears and Jack Citrin, studied the Prop 13 vote. In *Tax Revolt: Something for Nothing in California*, they report that the best predictors of support were neither class-based, nor party-based, nor even ideologically based. The best predictor was racial attitudes. The more “racially



Neoliberalism’s exaltation of market-centered values has created a distorted moral economy that elevates prosperity above all else. To resist this neoliberal turn, we need an analysis of how identity and class politics come together.

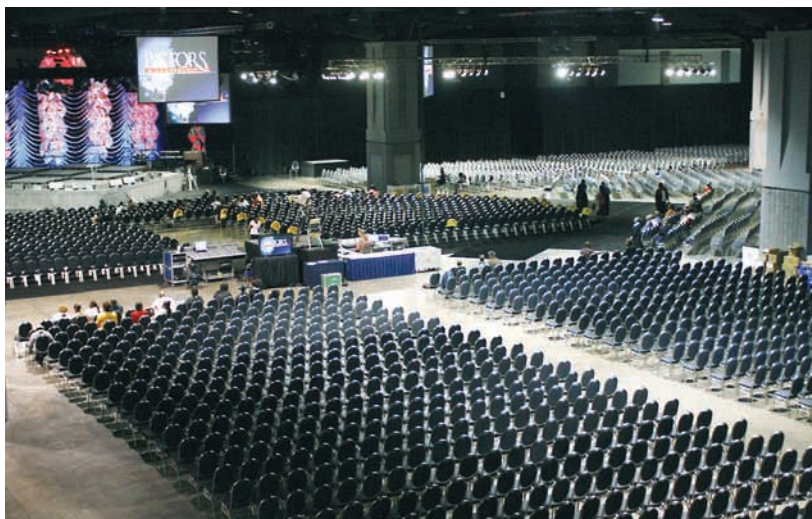
resentful” an individual was, the more likely he or she was to vote for Prop 13.

Over the past several decades, support for welfare has dropped like a rock while support for workfare has increased, even in the face of the recent economic crisis. This is because people tend to associate welfare with black women—a political project that fuses what we think of as “identity politics” with “class politics.” In recent years, as a result of the pernicious 1996 Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Restoration Act, individual states have competed against each other in a race to the bottom to see which state can be the hardest on its welfare recipients. The same dynamic happens within states at the local level, because there’s not only

LESTER SPENCE is an associate professor of political science and Africana studies at Johns Hopkins University.

first-order devolution (where the federal government makes the states responsible for administering the program) but also second-order devolution (where the states make individual counties and municipalities responsible). Research by Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram—authors of *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*—shows definitively that states and counties/municipalities with higher percentages of African Americans tend to be far harsher on welfare recipients than states and counties/municipalities with lower percentages, and that individual case workers are far more likely to be punitive when dealing with black recipients.

However, behaving as if identity politics were the solution is fool's gold as well. *Within* discriminated-against racial populations, class tensions reduce support for progressive political alternatives and stifle political critique. In 1973 black voters elected Atlanta's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, with a great deal of fanfare. Less than three years after his election, Jackson responded to striking black union workers by arguing their strike was a white-sponsored plot against him, suppressing black support for them. It's become increasingly common to hear black elected officials speak about the capacity of the (black) poor in ways that we would call racist had those officials not been black. During his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama blamed absent black fathers for poverty and crime in his 2008 Father's Day Speech. Obama also blamed the lack of an alternative politics on the lazy black male (whom he named "Pookie," perhaps based on the New Jack City character played by Chris Rock) rather than on Republicans or big business. This phenomenon is not new, but with Obama's election we now see it at every level of the government.



The prosperity gospel—popularized in part through mass meetings like T. D. Jakes's annual Pastors and Leadership Conference (above)—spreads the idea that "God's word and the market operate as one unit," Spence writes.

These examples make clear the identity politics embedded in class politics, as well as the class politics embedded in identity politics. Race works to make Americans believe "losers" of the neoliberal turn deserve their status. Poor populations of color are put in a particular bind as their interests are often ignored or dismissed as being too narrow, whether within inter-racial coalitions or intra-racial ones.

However, in understanding this dynamic, it also behooves us to understand the new moral economy developed under neoliberalism, a moral economy bolstered in part by the spread of the prosperity gospel.

## The Spread of the Prosperity Gospel and the New Moral Economy

The prosperity gospel—a particular form of Christianity that argues adherents will be materially prosperous if they follow God's will—is one of neoliberalism's most problematic "creations." This gospel has spread throughout the United States (and particularly within black communities) through mega-church pastors like Creflo Dollar, T.D. Jakes, and dozens of local church leaders. Of course prosperity gospel pastors are not the first to argue that Jesus—who stated it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it was for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God in Mark 10:25—wanted people to be materially wealthy. They are also not the first to argue that the best route to material wealth is to follow biblical principles. However it is no coincidence that their message, which in essence transforms prosperity gospel followers into self-interested, wealth-seeking biblical entrepreneurs, became prominent at the exact same moment the American CEO and the entrepreneur became model men under neoliberalism. To the extent that prosperity gospel acolytes spread a political message, that message is a simple one—poverty and its related ills are not a function of structural dynamics but rather a function of spiritual bankruptcy. The solution? Follow the Bible. . . and *tithe ten percent of your earnings*.

Under neoliberalism, the free-market economic theory associated with the University of Chicago ("the Chicago School") replaces other economic theories. But the spread of the prosperity gospel suggests that the neoliberal turn does not rely on economic theory alone. Rather it also relies on a set of spiritual ideas. The prosperity gospel binds the spirituality present in churches to a perverse new moral economy—one that leads individuals to believe (with their whole hearts) that God's word and the market operate as one unit. The market is moral, because God's word is the fundamental moral standard, and the moral standard supports the market.

This gospel has pernicious effects. It bolsters a perverse moral economy that convinces people that the reason they suffer economically is that they had too little faith and weren't diligent enough with their (*continued on page 64*)



# Revolutionary Suicide

## Risking Everything to Transform Society and Live Fully

BY LYNICE PINKARD

**G**LOBAL CAPITALISM is a system, or rather, an interlocking *network* of systems. Permeating every area of our lives, it operates much like the Catholic Church operated in Europe before the Reformation. It transcends nationhood but is immersed in politics. Its faults and hypocrisies can easily be pointed to, but that does little to sway the hearts and minds of the vast majority of people who have faith in its ideals or power. Its influence permeates every aspect of our daily lives. It forms a universe that controls our entire life cycle and rituals that guide the cycles of our days. It shapes what we have come to expect and to view as “normal.” Indeed, it is more powerful than the church ever was; Marx nailed his theses on the door, and capitalism has only grown in power, crushing its reformation in a way the Catholic Church never could.

It is, of course, ludicrous to believe that identity politics as it is conventionally understood could do much at all to halt the voracious appetite of a force this powerful. But it is similarly ludicrous to believe that all we need to do is to “give up identity politics” and do “real” and “important” work on capitalism, or to believe that if we address the economic system, racism will be resolved because it is secondary to economic oppression. White supremacy constantly works against our efforts to build principled coalitions to confront global capitalism.

The problem with narrow forms of identity politics is that they assume that groups of people organized around identity can achieve liberation from oppression in silos—in other words, as separate, individual identity groups. But the truth is that we are not individually salvageable.

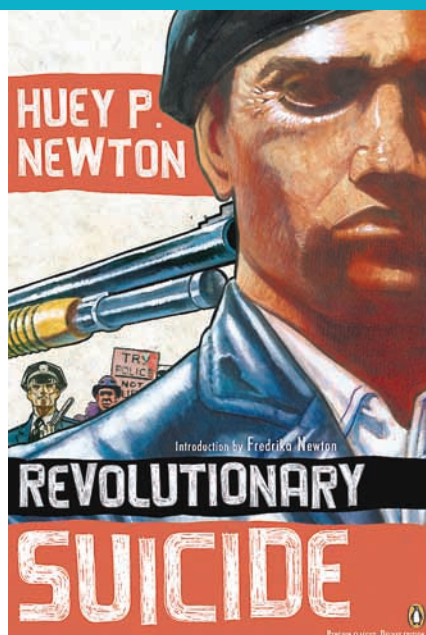
I'd like to present an alternative to conventional identity politics, one that requires that we understand the way that capitalism itself has grown out of a very particular kind of identity politics—white supremacy—aimed at securing “special benefits” for one group of people. It is not sufficient to speak only of identities of race, class, and gender. I believe



“The cost of revolutionary change is people’s willingness to pay with their own lives,” Pinkard writes. “This is what Rachel Corrie knew when she . . . refused to move and was killed by an Israeli army bulldozer in the Gaza Strip.”

we must also speak of *identities in relation to domination*. To what extent does any one of us identify with the forces of domination and participate in relations that reinforce that domination and the exploitation that goes with it? In what ways and to what extent are we wedded to our own upward mobility, financial security, good reputation, and ability to “win friends and influence people” in positions of power? Or conversely, do we identify (not wish to identify or pretend to identify but actually identify by putting our lives on the line) with efforts to reverse patterns of domination, empower people on the margins (even when we are not on the margins ourselves), and seek healthy, sustainable relations?

REV. LYNICE PINKARD is a pastor, teacher, and healer in Oakland, California. Her work is dedicated to decolonizing the human spirit and to freeing people from what she calls “empire affective disorder.”



What makes a person strong enough to risk his or her life for the sake of social justice, peace, and an end to racism? We have much to learn from Fannie Lou Hamer, Oscar Romero, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the many others who chose this path.

When we consider our identities in relation to domination, we realize the manifold ways in which we have structured our lives and desires in support of the very economic and social system that is dominating us. To shake free of this cycle, we need to embrace a radical break from business as usual. We need to commit revolutionary suicide. By this I mean not the killing of our bodies but the destruction of our attachments to security, status, wealth, and power. These attachments prevent us from becoming spiritually and politically alive. They prevent us from changing the violent structure of the society in which we live. Revolutionary suicide means living out our commitments, even when that means risking death.

When Huey Percy Newton, the cofounder of the Black Panther Party, called us to “revolutionary suicide,” it appears that he was making the same appeal as Jesus of Nazareth, who admonished, “Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for the sake of [the planet] will save them.” Essentially, both movement founders are saying the same thing. Salvation is not an individual matter. It entails saving, delivering, rescuing an entire civilization. This cannot be just another day at the bargain counter. The salvation of an entire planet requires a total risk of everything—of you, of me, of unyielding people everywhere, for all time. This is what revolutionary suicide is. The cost of revolutionary change is people’s willingness to pay with their own lives.

This is what Rachel Corrie knew when she, determined to prevent a Palestinian home in Rafah from being demolished, refused to move and was killed by an Israeli army bulldozer in the Gaza Strip. This is what Daniel Ellsberg knew when he made public the Pentagon Papers. It’s what Oscar Schindler knew when he rescued over 1,100 Jews from Nazi concentration camps, what subversive Hutus knew when they risked their lives to rescue Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide.

This call may sound extreme at first, but an unflinching look at the structure of our society reveals why nothing less is enough. Before returning to the question of revolutionary suicide and what it might mean in each of our lives, let’s look at what we’re up against.

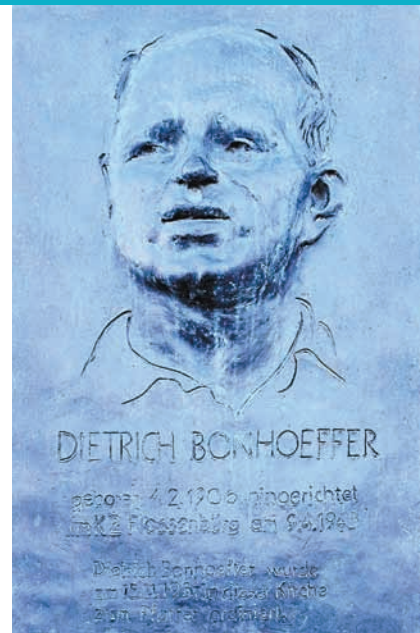
## The System of Global Capitalism

The latest and arguably the most effective in a 5,000-year series of human methodologies for dominating others and the planet, global capitalism binds the majority of the earth’s population in poverty, substitutes consumption for humanity and the love of life, and fosters wanton depletion of the earth’s resources while stuffing the wallets and stock portfolios of a very few people at the top of the system, while at the same time creating and propagating fantasies about upward mobility among the rest of us and distributing paltry but desperately needed benefits that inspire our loyalty to the very system that is brutalizing us. It’s a situation expressed succinctly by Morpheus in *The Matrix*:

The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you are inside and look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters—the very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still part of that system, and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged and many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system, they will fight to protect it.

Global capitalism has enabled the United States to become the largest and most powerful empire ever created. The secret of its success is economic imperialism without national expansion. The American capitalist empire is basically a feudal one. Nations are the vassals of America. They keep their populations in line, tithe resources, and keep their markets





open to the United States. The price to the United States of international aid (itself a farce), a large military budget, and occasional conflict is more than offset by not having to actively suppress and manage the population of each country. Further, the United States benefits from the conflict between the poor and elite within each country, regional conflicts that keep countries from focusing solely on the United States, and American nationalism that reduces internal conflict within its home base. Its interwoven tensions make it almost impossible to effectively resist.

No policy, program, charity, or reform effort will seriously alleviate the oppression perpetrated by global capitalism. We can ease pain and help individuals, but we will not change the basic distribution of wealth, status, or power unless we address the economic system that frames our lives. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, capitalism abhors the equitable distribution of wealth. As new groups of people gain more skills and degrees, they end up merely exchanging places with the people above them as they rise up the economic ladder. Even if they produce wealth as they do so, the law of concentration dictates that the middle class is then further squeezed, ensuring that the net population of poor people is the same if not greater. Unfortunately, conservatives are correct that the only way of increasing the lot of the poor in the United States within the current system is to produce growth by further exploiting the poor in other countries—exactly the trajectory we are now on. While the rich get richer faster, the poor in America have some chance of sharing the crumbs.

Those of us who are concerned with justice on a global scale should clearly understand that an increase in social programs—albeit necessary as “aspirin practices” to remediate day-to-day suffering—will never achieve the goals of social justice, no matter how well funded those programs are. Individuals can change their position, and the quality of life

for those at the bottom may be slightly improved, but justice will remain elusive. Only a change in the economic structure will accomplish justice. For those of us concerned with global justice, confronting global capitalism is central.

To understand what will be required of us in that confrontation, we must first take an unsentimental look at the “state” of affairs.

## Capitalism Is Protected by the State

Throughout history, the U.S. government has served as an immune system for capitalism, one that not only protects it from outside threats (worker uprisings, for example, or Communism), but from internal ones as well. In fact, one of the government’s primary jobs is to protect capitalism from its own excesses.

In order for the proper balance to be established, capitalism must first be defined as an integral aspect of the nation, which has been the case for the United States since its founding. All patriotic fairy tales aside, the United States was founded to serve the economic interests of wealthy European and European-descended landowners. The Revolutionary War was organized and financed because wealthy business and plantation owners were tired of being taxed. We are led to believe that the real issue was “taxation without representation,” but are we to believe that they would have enjoyed taxation with representation? At the core, the organizers and financiers of the American Revolution felt that their nation should help them accrue wealth. The nation should serve the wealthy, not vice versa. The fact that women, slaves, and poor people had no voting rights was not a historical oversight. The entire purpose of the new nation was to protect the property rights of wealthy, white men.

However, because the United States was a struggling, fledgling nation, national identification was not with the

ruling or owning class, but with the worker turned entrepreneur. This is vital: the United States tapped into the true passion of the worker by developing and glorifying the concept of the entrepreneur. Even Marx waxed rhapsodic regarding the heroic nature of the individual struggling to cast off the determination of feudal classes through the gathering of wealth.

The United States has understood for centuries that this identification is crucial to its success. This “identity” as an entrepreneurial nation has remained intact through substantial internal transformation and the repositioning of America in the global power struggle. It is, perhaps, the magic ingredient that has allowed capitalism to survive the weaknesses Marx saw at its core. The lure of becoming an entrepreneur, and the endless anecdotal evidence that suggests that anyone (at least in America) can rise from “rags to riches,” have provided the primary safeguard against capitalism’s destruction through worker rebellion. It is true that some European and East Asian immigrant men (and hence their families) were generally able to increase their economic standing over three generations. However, this success was economically possible because of the oppression of women, blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, and others. It was also funded by the exploitation of people in other countries whose stolen labor and resources were used to offset the rising cost of labor in the United States.

However, there are times, especially when there is an economic downturn, that the fable of opportunity becomes less comforting. At these times more people begin to notice the extreme concentration of wealth and “the disappearance of the middle class.” It is important to note that the disparities have always been present, even though the extreme wealth of the United States still allows many Americans to purchase considerable comfort. The fact is that this country has the largest percentage of poverty of any industrialized, Western nation. When a critical percentage of the bottom 90 percent begins to become truly discontented, an interesting transition occurs. The government, which during times of growth is seen as a bureaucratic parasite inhibiting the potential and freedom of the individual, now becomes the protector. The government must send a message that the economic system is just fine (early 2008), but that evildoers have been at work. Sometimes Americans are told that the problems result from certain politicians and businesses that have been taking advantage of the freedom offered by capitalism. Other times we’re told that the problem lies with those who have sought to lead the nation away from capitalism. Then the government promotes itself as a “safety net” for those who have “fallen through the cracks” of the system. Programs are established to help the unfortunate. Of course, this is not about bad luck or fortune. The poor are both a required element and a natural byproduct of capitalism. The programs do not have the power or resources required to truly lift people out of poverty and only cause the system to seem benign and resentment to be directed at those who are exploited.

All of this goes to show that the United States has effectively established capitalism as essential to the nation’s identity. The United States has repeatedly proved its willingness to protect capitalism above all other things. In exchange for this defense from internal and external enemies, capitalism supposedly tolerates the “restrictions” that government puts in place to guard capitalism from itself—to guard capitalism against monopolies, extreme economic cycles, and exploitation.

### The Complicity of Civic Institutions

We have seen how government and law have been made to serve the perpetuation of global capitalism, and we have also noted how the state—the organizations of the military, the police, and the criminal justice system—will discipline our bodies through force and coercion if we challenge capitalism too directly. But equally powerful are the fortresses of civil society that sit next to the state: all of the religious, legal, educational, and cultural institutions that discipline our minds and emotions and mediate supremacist hegemonies through socialization and consent.

One of the most dangerous and intractable challenges posed by a hegemonic society is that hegemony is mediated and reinforced through the material practices of everyday

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"White supremacy is the handmaiden of capitalism, serving to fuel, justify, and strengthen it at every turn," Pinkard writes. Artist Michael D'Antuono created this painting, *A Tale of Two Hoodies*, following the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teen, in 2012.

life. Often people are not consciously aware that their consent is being manufactured and that they are being socialized to accept, legitimate, indeed, prop up their own oppression. This is the process of institutionalizing "common sense" so that people take the status quo for granted and assume that it is vital to the maintenance of economic and political "stability."

Take, for example, religion, one of the powerful fortresses of civil society. There is an equivocal nature to religion: it can either mediate hegemony as an opiate or counter hegemony as a revolutionary force. Throughout history we see religion serving imperial hegemony (church support for California's Proposition 8) and working against it (the Civil Rights Movement). Sadly, the contemporary American church—part of the religious industrial complex and a vassal of the American empire—overwhelmingly serves the interests of the state, which in turn serves the wealthy.

My criticism of "the church" does not mean to imply that there are no revolutionary acts of resistance by individual churches, church members, or church leaders. In fact, I am writing as a Christian pastor. Christianity is my home, and because I love the best that this tradition has to offer, I feel compelled to plumb the ruins, identifying and rooting out the distortions that impede the life-giving potential of the gospel. It is important to interrogate the American church as a whole as one of the ideological state apparatuses.

## The Co-opted American Church

In reality, the American church, since its inception, has been feeding on the toxic waste of the American nation-state. Walter Brueggemann, in *Mandate to Difference*, describes

our society as consumerist ("more" equals "safer and happier"), therapeutic (the goal is to live a pain-free, stress-free, undisturbed life of convenience), militaristic (we must protect our entitled advantage and unsustainable lifestyle with force), and technological (visionary alternatives are screened out and eliminated as impractical in favor of small technocratic fixes to the existing systems). The American church, by and large, offers no substantive critique of these assumptions. Inured to the reality of global corporate empire-building and its parasitical processes, it simply has no reason to revolt. Instead, the church, like the consumer-capitalist culture shot all through it, is fixated on "good marketing strategies" and "unlimited growth."

As such, the church cannot foster the Gospel of revolutionary, death-defying self-annihilation in the service of love but can only propagate a glut of Christian material (whether books, plays, movies, or sermons) by entrepreneurial preachers and entertainers, the net effect of which is to keep people at a safe remove from the radically transformative experience of the Gospel. "Christian material" is designed not to trouble and agitate but to reassure. Consequently, our "religion" cannot possibly fulfill its original function of disturbing the peace.

The American church cannot bear the truth that, having been utterly co-opted by the economic empire, we now spend much of our time lost in fanciful forms of piety. Week after week, we sit unconscious, consuming sermons that, like dentists' needles, anesthetize us, lulling us into a pain-suppressing sleep before they defang us, rendering us docile and innocuous. Without teeth, the church, infantilized, is ever ready for its pacifier. Pacifiers come in all shapes and sizes—they don't ever touch the root of our anguished hunger, but they do at least plug our holes.

As it turns out, for generations, the people selling the church and the people consuming it have really been in the same boat. We continue to embrace things that we do not really respect, believe, or love in order to continue buying things that we do not really want or need. If we were dealing *only* with expensive houses, cars, and clothing, the situation would not be so grave. The trouble is that serious things are bought—war and repression as "peace," self-interest as "generosity," greed as "opportunity," brutality as "national interest," and exploitation as "the free market"—with the same essential lack of consciousness. The entire culture is consumed in lies, and the Christian church, having fully absorbed this culture, serves to prop up this whole Barnum & Bailey charade.

The church has not defected from this systematic mendacity but has instead helped to foster it. The other institutions of civil society—education, media, law, etc.—serve in similar ways to support the existing exploitative system and manufacture our consent to our own exploitation and oppression.

(continued on page 64)



Children of domestic workers join with children cared for by domestic workers and others on a march in 2012 to demand passage of the California Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights.

## The Caring Majority

### Building a Coalition Around Domestic Workers' Rights

BY AI-JEN POO

**A**T LEAST 800,000 WOMEN go to work in other people's homes each day in the United States, serving as nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for our elders and loved ones with disabilities. By caring for children and offering the aging both emotional support and assistance with the basic activities of daily life, they enable the recipients of their care to lead full and dignified lives. And by taking care of others' families and homes, these women make it possible for their employers to go to work every day. If domestic workers went on strike, they could paralyze almost every industry. Doctors, lawyers, bankers, professors, small business owners, civil sector employees,

and media executives would all be affected. The entire economy would tremble.

These are also the workers who are most consistently in contact with the most vulnerable clients of our health care system, who substantially cut healthcare costs by keeping people in their homes and communities and out of radically more expensive institutions. During natural disasters, caregivers are unsung heroes, often choosing to stay with their clients and see them through to safety, even when it means not going home to look after their own families.

Yet in return for the emotionally and physically arduous, life-sustaining services they provide, care workers earn, on

AI-JEN POO is director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and co-director of the Caring Across Generations campaign. This piece was produced in collaboration with Ariane Conrad, a writer and editorial consultant known as the Book Doula, whose work has appeared in the *Sun*, the *Nation*, and *Spirituality and Health*.

National Domestic Workers Alliance



average, less than \$10 per hour. They are not eligible for overtime compensation, and few receive paid vacation or sick days, despite the high rate of injury and burnout associated with care work. Most are subject to termination without notice and without severance pay.

Domestic workers are explicitly excluded from the right to organize and collectively bargain through the National Labor Relations Act. But even if they were included, the dynamics of their employment make it difficult, if not impossible, to engage in collective bargaining in the traditional sense. Domestic workers labor in private homes that function as separate workplaces; there is neither a collective workforce nor is there usually a central employer with whom to bargain. When individual workers try to bargain with their employers, termination is a common result, since employers can simply hire another worker. Because this work has historically been associated with the unpaid work of women in the home or with the poorly paid work of women of color and immigrant women, it remains undervalued in public consciousness.

To relegate the issues of domestics and care workers to the terrain of “immigrant issues,” or even the broader categories of women’s issues or workers’ rights, however, is to miss a tremendous opportunity. Any single lens offers blindered, shortsighted vision, when what we need now for real progress is a long and expansive view. In my work, *care* has emerged as the connective tissue to encompass all identities and enable us to transcend to the level of values, ethics, even spirituality. We must become a nation that values care—a caring America.

Each one of us is connected to care. From the moment we’re born, before we recognize our membership in any group, even before we identify our gender, we, like all mammals, are dependent on the nurture of another. Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter has said, “There are only four kinds of people in the world: those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who need caregiving.” Even the most self-reliant of adults is connected to a system that helps meet their basic needs. Care roots us in the interconnectedness of the world.

My realization of the tremendously unifying power of the ethos of care was not with me from the start. It developed over time, during two decades spent organizing under a more traditional issue-based model.

## A Bill of Rights for Domestic Workers

Upon entering labor organizing work in the late 1990s, I spent several years organizing with domestic workers in the Asian community in New York. However, it quickly became clear that Asian women were only a small percentage of the domestic workforce. The majority of domestic workers were Caribbean and Latina women, but no organizations existed to engage these workers. So we built one: Domestic Workers United. The first convention we held brought together



“In the intimate space in which caregivers work, the ‘us vs. them’ model no longer serves,” Poo writes. “The moment when employers of domestic workers became our partners was a profound step.” Here, a domestic worker sits with her employer.

domestic workers from over a dozen different countries speaking six different languages. Yet these women found a common voice as they shared their experiences of laboring without respect or basic labor standards, and together they developed a united vision for jobs with dignity.

Seeking to pass a bill of rights for domestic workers through New York’s state legislature, Domestic Workers United coordinated with the other groups that organized domestic workers in New York: the Women Workers Project from the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence, Andolan Organizing South Asian Workers, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, Unity Housecleaners, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, Adhikaar for Human Rights, and Cidadão Global. Each of these was based in its respective immigrant community. Together, we formed the New York Domestic Worker Justice Coalition and launched the bill of rights campaign, which became the place where domestic workers came together across communities to maximize their power as a workforce.

During the campaign’s six years, we realized that we could not win formal acknowledgment of the value of domestic work with only the voices of this nearly invisible workforce. This led us to a transformative shift in our organizing, as we gradually understood that nearly all people are connected to a domestic worker, whether they were raised by a domestic worker, or employed domestics, or had relatives who were caregivers, or had themselves done caregiving work. This enabled us to appeal to people from all walks of life based on an expanded sense of self-interest that acknowledged important relationships and inescapable interdependencies.

We built a winning coalition that crossed lines of race, class, gender, and age. Our coalition included workers who knew the situation of caregivers, such as members of the doormen’s and security guards’ union (SEIU Local 32BJ); workers who faced similar obstacles, such as farm workers, who were also excluded from the protection of labor laws; labor leaders (many of whom, including AFL-CIO president

John Sweeney, had family members who were domestics); immigrant groups; women's organizations; faith-based groups; students; and more. Most powerful of all were the children who were looked after by nannies, the elders and others who were supported by caregivers, and the people who employed those nannies, caregivers, and housekeepers.

Much of traditional workplace organizing has been about seeing the boss as the enemy. Yet in the intimate space in which caregivers work, the "us vs. them" model no longer serves. While there are often antagonisms in the employment relationship, there are also often deep ties of familiarity and affection between workers and the families with whom they work. Because of the intimacy of the relationships, the dynamics transcend our usual categories, definitions, and methods for negotiation. The moment when employers of domestic workers became our partners was a profound step toward understanding how finding common ground—being able to see and take into account the other's experience—can lead to an expanded sense of self-interest.

## Broad Frames Yield Robust Coalitions

On August 31, 2010, the New York Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights was signed into law. The final legislation, covering more than 200,000 women, mandated eight-hour workdays, overtime pay, a minimum of twenty-four consecutive hours of rest per week, at least three paid days off per year, protection against discrimination and harassment, and workers compensation insurance protection. Our flagship campaign became a symbol of the beginning of the end of invisibility for domestic workers around the country. While the campaign was building toward this breakthrough moment, the domestic workers' movement around the country was growing. Just three years before, the National Domestic Workers Alliance had formed with approximately fifty representatives of domestic workers' organizations.

Rather than simply framing our work as a workers' rights campaign focused strictly on the issues of domestic workers, we intentionally built the campaign around broader issues. We based our frames on our analysis of the root causes of the problems facing domestic workers, including the devaluing of "women's work" in the home, the legacy of slavery and racism in the United States, and the lack of a social safety net in the United States and internationally.

Our message that we need to "respect the work that makes all other work possible" allowed us to build relationships with women's organizations, mothers, and long-time advocates for gender justice and women's equality. Our "reverse a long history of discrimination and exclusion" message allowed us to build with farm workers, LGBT communities, guest workers, and the millions of others excluded by the existing legal system. Our "standards benefit everyone" message highlighted our interconnectedness as people, and it allowed us to build relationships with unions, employers, faith leaders,



Organizers affiliated with the National Domestic Worker's Alliance meet in Washington, D.C. "We built a winning coalition that crossed lines of race, class, gender, and age," Poo writes.

and other people who believed in the moral imperative of basic human rights.

The campaign taught us that it is possible to frame any campaign broadly enough to allow us to pull in unexpected allies and therefore to bring more power to our agenda. We didn't only build the tactical power we needed to win our fight; we began to change the nature of social relationships. We had begun to shift the culture toward valuing caring.

## Caring Across Generations

With a national network of domestic workers in place, we have been able to observe a new trend affecting the workforce: the explosion of the nation's aging population. Every eight seconds someone turns sixty-five in America, and with medical advancements, people are living longer than ever before. Senior citizens want to age comfortably and with dignity in their own homes, and this requires the skilled attention of home-care workers. We have begun to see workers who were originally hired as nannies or housekeepers being called upon to care for the aging relatives of their employers.

The current situation of long-term care workers—the fastest growing workforce in the country—entails low wages, long hours, inadequate training, and little chance for career advancement. These conditions have led to a high turnover in the industry and a resultant low quality of care. If we can turn those jobs into dignified jobs, it will have a ripple effect socially, economically, and spiritually, as we encourage society to affirm the dignity of people at every stage of life, into old age, and in every walk of life, including caregiving.

In the coming era, the productive nature of care work can no longer be underestimated or undervalued. The economy of the future needs to re-evaluate our most fundamental resources, the foundations on which everything else in our human society is built: relationships, nurture, home, as well as natural resources like clean water and air and healthy food. Life itself.

In 2011 the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Jobs with Justice launched the Caring Across Generations campaign, together with twenty (*continued on page 69*)





A mural in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood exhorts viewers to "keep loving each other" and serves as a memorial to Derriion Albert, an innocent sixteen-year-old bystander who was beaten to death in a turf brawl between two local gangs.

## Resisting Post-Oppression Narratives

BY CHRISTIAN SUNDQUIST

**M**Y WIFE, DAUGHTER, AND I recently decided to spend the holiday season with my mother and siblings at the family home on the South Side of Chicago. Upon arrival at Nana's house, I realized that I would always regard Chicago as "home," despite having lived on the East Coast for the last sixteen years. And yet whenever I visit my childhood home, I often experience an odd muddle of feelings—from love and excitement at reuniting with family and old friends to anguish and despondency over the unrelenting poverty and crime that has come to define my community. A thoroughly African American area due to past and current segregative practices, the Woodlawn-Roseland neighborhood that I grew up in has long been plagued with high rates of crime, poverty, and unemployment. And while I spent long stretches of my childhood on "welfare" and avoiding gang violence, I had always remained ardently hopeful for the future of my community. Indeed,

my commitment to social justice was strongly shaped by my experiences growing up in the "wild, wild, 100s" (south of 100th Street) and fed my personal and scholarly interests in overcoming oppression through action and critical theory.

As we drove through my old neighborhood, any lingering feelings of Obama-esque hope for change were tempered by the too-familiar signs of crushing poverty: burned-out buildings, hopeless drug addicts, boarded-up homes, and gang-controlled corner blocks. Far from experiencing a revival, my Woodlawn-Roseland neighborhood has suffered a re-entrenchment of race-based poverty over the last two decades. The strict racial boundaries that separate our neighborhood from nearby "white" neighborhoods are still often enforced with violence. Racial re-segregation of our public schools has increased at a startling rate over the last few years, while poverty and crime have become more rampant. And perhaps most worrisome, the feeling of hope for

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KLEO/Jeffrey Thomas (jayshep.wix.com/jshepphoto)



“My Woodlawn-Roseland neighborhood has suffered a re-entrenchment of race-based poverty over the last two decades,” Sundquist writes. Here, a woman carries a child past the half-demolished remains of an old department store in Roseland.

the future that previously defined my old neighborhood has dissipated since my childhood and is now replaced with a sense of desperation and resignation.

I steeled myself as we approached the family house, reminding myself that my mother’s new next door neighbor was a high-ranking leader of the Gangster Disciples (“Folks”) gang. I steeled myself at the memory of my youngest sister having to shield her infant son (my nephew) with her body during a fatal shooting at the nearby Ada Park a couple of years prior. I steeled myself as I considered the safety of my wife and infant daughter, both snoozing quietly in the backseat of the rental car.

This narrative of my community mirrors the national reality. It is clear that our society continues to struggle with increasing levels of poverty and racial inequality. In the aftermath of the “great recession,” the rate of income inequality between the richest Americans and the middle-class and poor has eclipsed the previous high set during the Great Depression. The wealth gap between white and non-white households, similarly, has escalated to its highest level in twenty-five years. As the degrees of economic inequality continue to rise during the modern era, so do race- and class-based disparities in a variety of social contexts, including education, health outcomes, and rates of incarceration. Rising social inequality has been thoroughly linked to public policy failures to implement progressive financial reform and address continued racial discrimination.

## The Rise of a Post-Oppression Worldview

Despite these realities, my community’s narrative seems to be at odds with the *national narrative* of racial progress and the purported end of systemic class exploitation and

oppression. A disturbing post-race and post-class worldview has taken root in our society, government, and law, whereby race and class disparities are thought to be caused by neutral “cultural” or market forces rather than systemic discrimination and oppression. Simply put, the relevance of the embedded systemic nature of class exploitation and racial discrimination has diminished in popularity as an explanation for our society’s continuing social inequalities. In its stead, a “post-oppression” ideology and rhetoric has developed, which leaves “distortions” (such as race-based disparities) to the market alone to resolve.

Rather than recognize that educational, employment, health, wealth, and incarceration disparities (to name a few) are linked to systemic class and race oppression, the burgeoning “post-oppression” narrative provides ostensibly “neutral” explanations for inequality.

In the education context, this perspective is manifest in many modern reformers’ claim that racial discrimination and poverty are not key predictors of poor academic performance. Rather, the “choice” movement of educational reform asserts that racial and class disparities in public education can be eliminated by incorporating basic economic principles such as consumer choice, market competition, and accountability into education policy. As such, under the class- and race-neutral “choice” perspective, the crisis of public education is typically linked to poor teacher performance and school quality.

In the affirmative action context, the social and judicial trend has been to distort and mischaracterize the nature and historical purpose of race-sensitive social policy. Originally, affirmative action policy developed to recognize that both past and current racial discrimination and oppression affect the life outcomes of non-white persons. That is, affirmative action was defined in terms of social inclusion. And yet now, under a post-oppression narrative, the focus of affirmative action has shifted to center on redressing the professed injuries suffered by innocent white victims.

In the sociology context, academics and policy makers have resurrected the discredited notion that a “culture of poverty” contributes to the perpetuation of class and racial inequality. And in the genetics context, researchers increasingly assume (wrongly) that race and class disparities in health outcomes are linked in part to immutable racial genetic differences, obscuring the role that persistent poverty and racial discrimination play in health care. Genetic researchers thus increasingly view race in biological terms, with an eye towards commoditizing racial health disparities into a pharmaceutical good.

The disturbing trend to view race in biological terms has also arisen in the criminal justice context, where it is now commonplace for prosecutors to introduce DNA evidence against criminal defendants, estimating the likelihood that another “Hispanic” or “African American” (*continued on page 70*)





“Telling stories is one way of resisting the widespread transactional quality of interactions in our society,” Raj writes. Here, participants in a Center for Story-Based Strategy training discuss how a story’s frame defines what is seen and what is left out.

Scott Braley (scottbraley.com)

# Intersectional Politics

## Recovering Our Interdependent Wholeness

BY NITIKA RAJ

**I**N TODAY’S WORLD, our lives are systematically fragmented and our relationships are transactional. When we try to put the pieces back together, we call it an intersectional analysis. However, the heart of the matter involves more than identifying intersections between different forms of oppression: it involves healing a broken vision and recovering our wholeness.

I used to work for a non-profit organization addressing domestic violence in South Asian communities. Time after time, when survivors of violence called the helpline, they didn’t just want advice and assistance, they also wanted to tell their stories. But soon, the intake process took over. Each helpline advocate had a form to fill out, a series of questions grouped within neat categories. Soon, survivors told fewer narratives and responded more to specific questions. By the fourth or fifth time they called, they were spitting responses to questions that hadn’t been asked—information they knew was necessary for social service agencies. This process enabled the helpline advocates to refer each survivor-client to appropriate resources, but it did not move us toward wholeness.

### Resisting the Transactional Quality of Capitalist Life

In the realm of social justice work, there is an increasing desire for intersectional analyses and solutions. Even when the issue or population an organization is working with is very specific, in order to rally support for the cause, we need a critical mass of people invested in seeing change. To build that activated base, we need to *feel* the interconnectedness of our lives.

The more we try to analyze race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion/spirituality, nationality, immigration status, and the other social identities that have been constructed to have privileges or disadvantages associated with them, the more complex they seem. But when we listen to people share their life stories, we can intuit a wholeness that defies easy categorization. In our activism, we need to find a place for hearing stories that increase our capacity for complexity and encourage us not to jump to piecemeal solutions.

The organization I work with now, Resource Generation, uses storytelling as a core organizing strategy to integrate

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Members of Standing in Our Power, an intergenerational network of women of color leaders associated with Spirit in Action, work to integrate spirit and a sense of interconnection more fully into their social transformation work.

racial and economic justice work. Through our stories, we can reclaim our whole selves at an individual level and also see the full picture at a macro level. We organize young people with wealth to leverage our financial resources for social change. Working from a place of our own privilege is liberatory because we are working to reclaim our own humanity. During the Occupy movement, we were the ones holding signs that read, “We are the 1 percent and we stand with the 99 percent.” We are working to redistribute wealth and to change the mechanisms of distribution to be more equitable. The Center for Story-Based Strategy is another organization that recognizes the power of narratives in fueling social change and how critical stories are in framing issues.

Telling stories is one way of resisting the widespread transactional nature of interactions in our society, which is an obvious result of capitalism. It’s important to remember the stories behind U.S. wealth, which was created from land, labor, and natural resources. Native Americans were pushed off the majority of U.S. lands by violent force, and then Africans were enslaved to work that land. White landowners and slaveowners ultimately controlled the resources mined from land and water. To understand how class, spiritual, and identity politics are connected or divorced from each other, it’s necessary to understand how capitalism shapes our society.

There are some core values embedded in our current economic system: the imperatives to minimize costs, maximize profits, maintain clear hierarchies, privatize, and maintain a free market through the unregulated movement of capital and the prioritization of corporate rights over citizens’ rights. It’s a system that relies on an overabundance of

bodies willing to do the work and a scarcity of work. Capitalism relies on able bodies, which it consumes at a high rate. Because our paychecks sustain our lives, we work our bodies as hard as we can, as hard as we have to, and we are left with no spare time to feel the suppression of our spirit.

## Reaching for Interconnection

The absence of a spiritual center in most social justice work has made it so that we are doing things similarly in both nonprofit and for-profit sectors. We fragment issues that are actually deeply connected—like classism and disability, or spirituality and gender, or climate change and war. We don’t notice the interconnections until we see the increasing number of wars driven by a desire to control natural resources. The Grassroots Global Justice Alliance names the intersection eloquently in its call: “No war! No warming! Building an economy for the people and the planet.”

Without a spiritual center, we also underestimate the power of joy, and we don’t prioritize balance. Work is not simply a means to an end. Whatever our paid or unpaid work is, it is one of the processes by which we consistently engage with the world, contribute, learn, grow, and feel a sense of pride. Whether we are making a new software product, working for the rights of domestic workers, or raising children, how can we do so in a way that allows us to be whole in mind, body, and spirit? How can we actually *feel* the ways in which all our lives are interconnected? An exciting challenge for spiritual progressives is to share and enact our visions in ways that make a difference to people’s material lives on the ground.





Members of the Social Justice Fund Northwest's Giving Project in Portland explore the roots of the racial wealth divide.

## Viewing Each Issue through Multiple Lenses

From a class lens, we always have to ask: Whose experiences are informing or leading our decision-making? How does this project impact people who are poor and working class? What are the economic motivations behind each political scenario? Who benefits from each option, and how can we reframe the issues to present more win-win options for all? Is there a creative alternative that is economically viable at any scale? One example of exciting work in this arena is the Social Justice Fund Northwest's effort to effect immense redistribution through multi-racial, cross-class donor circles. Resource Generation is working in tandem to politicize wealthy members into giving circles, to promote socially responsible investing, and to raise taxes on the wealthy.

From a spiritual lens, we have to ask: Perhaps this "makes sense," but does it also feel right? Does this analysis recognize the inherent goodness and potential for transformation in all people? Are we in integrity with our selves and our larger Self? What is the impact on our collective self? A spiritual lens assumes that we have what we need to survive and that we are up to the challenge of the moment. It also assumes non-duality, which Thich Nhat Hanh writes eloquently about. He reminds us that there are no sides, just the illusion of division. Spirit in Action is an organization that offers innovative leadership in this arena by building heart-centered social justice leaders and practicing interdependence as a core value. Zenyu is another powerful organization leading with a spiritual lens in social change work, while centering the experiences of LGBTQ people of color.

From an identity lens, we have to ask: How has this identity been shaped by history, geography, and political motivation? What are inherited realities, options, and limitations for entire groups of people? What is the resilience we can build upon and the current struggles that we need to support? Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha are queer activist women of color living with disabilities and chronic illness who organize using writing, zines, blogs, performance, poetry, and their in-person work as speakers and trainers. They are blazing trails that make

interdependence a lived reality, and they invite us all to step up to our own wholeness in connection.

Our starting step is to integrate all of these lenses to develop a more holistic analysis, and to act in a way that allows us to feel all our steps. In an article in the April 2013 issue of *Sun* magazine, Philip Shepherd describes the need for us to engage the brain in our belly and to listen *through* the body and not just to the body. If we cannot feel the pain of people who are hurting, and the hope of the work we are doing, and the moments we need to pause to rest, cry, or celebrate, then we limit our capacity for bringing people along for the long haul. We limit the joy and the resilience that refuel us in our daily lives.

## Integrating Spirit into Social Justice Work

Before asking the political Left to integrate spirit into social justice work, we need to integrate it fully in how we as spiritual progressives do our own work. One example of where this work is happening is the Stone House in North Carolina. A center for spiritual life and strategic action, the Stone House offers retreats that provide a sanctuary and spiritual grounding space for activists. If breath is the core of our being, then we need to breathe our creative, loving, brilliant fullness into motion together.

There is also an increase in people bringing body-based practices like generative somatics into social justice work. Generative somatics—which integrates healing bodywork, social analysis, and activism aimed at systemic transformation—builds politicized healers who work with individuals and communities. In collaboration with Social Justice Leadership, these healers created the Transformative Leadership Program for Funders and Donors to deepen trust and coordination in philanthropic work. These are steps forward that have gone beyond single-issue lenses.

Our job in the current moment is to seize this opportunity and go for big visions. We need to zoom out and notice the complex ecosystems that surround us. From that place, we can begin by asking questions from various lenses to fill out the complete picture. No single entity has that picture or solution, which is simply proof of our interconnectedness. We cannot operate like we have in the past anymore, hoping to win women's liberation before Black women's or before queer and trans women's. There is a cracking of the economic system that has become increasingly visible to the world at large, and our greatest failure would be to ask for incremental change when we could be creating radical transformation. In the asking, we concede power.

We are in a stage of great energy-building. Our preparation right now needs to include pause, questioning, embodiment, laughter, collective visioning, healing, and practicing actions in solidarity. The moment for collective action is ripening. ■

# Our Issues Entwine

## LGBTQ Aging and Economic Justice

BY ROBERT ESPINOZA

**M**Y IMMIGRANT MOTHER sits silently in a room the size of a small kitchen. Earlier this year, she survived multiple failures of the heart, kidneys, and limbs over the course of six weeks. She is seventy-three, uses a wheelchair, and for the first time in her life is surrounded by white people who do not speak Spanish, in the only nearby nursing home my parents can afford. In turn, my father drives through the days confronted by three omnipresent realities: hour-long daily visits with my mother, a night shift to keep him mentally and financially afloat, and a mailbox flooded with health care bills, insurance disputes and the complexity of navigating Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurers. When I speak of health reform, queer rights, or racial and economic justice, he gazes at me solemnly. He survived a lifetime of racial discrimination, fought in two wars and lived through the ensuing decades with a cacophony in his psyche. At seventy-eight, nearly blind and deaf, he will hear nothing of systems and reform. More often than not, these days we sit in silence.

This silence haunts me as an advocate who works at the intersection of aging and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights. The aging and LGBTQ advocacy fields often propose policy solutions that are too narrow to address the complexity of how all marginalized people—including heterosexual people of color such as my parents, members of the LGBTQ community, and more—experience the process of aging. We need social transformations that address the intersecting forms of oppression that older people face—and that can make sense of the chaos and silence that shroud my parents. This has become especially clear to me through my work as the director of a national policy program devoted to improving the health and well-being of LGBTQ older people.

ROBERT ESPINOZA, a policy analyst and writer who specializes in LGBTQ rights, aging, and racial and economic justice, currently serves as the senior director for public policy and communications at SAGE, the country's largest national organization advocating for LGBT older people.



A closer look at the lives of aging LGBTQ people reveals how deeply identity politics and class politics are entangled. Here, an older protester rallies for marriage equality in Pasadena, California.

### Working at the Intersection of Class and Identity Politics

In the aging and long-term care field, the hardship of aging is often articulated through conceptually limited silos that omit how discrimination affects the economic wellness of older people's lives. Mainstream LGBTQ rights leaders remain largely mute on economic injustice, instead seeking strategies for legal equality and minimizing justice approaches that envision more expansive economic systems of support. And while many queer thinkers have outlined an economic vision animated by queer liberation, this framework remains largely absent in most activist spaces central to my work.

Kitredge Cherry (jesusinlove.org)



The organization where I work advocates for public policies that acknowledge LGBTQ people in critical programs such as Social Security and Medicaid (as two examples) and that expand government funding, services, and research for queer elders nationwide. We confront the cultural attitudes and media representations fueled by ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, gender binarism, structural racism, and HIV stigma. This multi-issue, intersectional approach to queer rights and healthy aging means that I work at the crossroads of some of our country's most pressing and contested issues—from health and health care access, to aging and long-term care, to housing and unemployment, and more.

It also means that we witness how systemic inequities collide in later life to destabilize millions of older people without the income or supports to age in dignity. Of note, we observe the specific effects that discrimination and income inequality have on queer people as they age. Research shows that many LGBTQ elders enter their later years with reduced earnings; are single, childless, and with a more fragile personal safety net than their peers; and deal with persistent discrimination in all aspects of their lives. The right-wing attack on our social safety net and on the lives of poor people, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ people exacerbates these conditions.

Despite my best attempts to convey the multiple obstacles facing queer elders (and the overlapping systems that should unite all of us across movements), I regularly confront three arguments from my peers across fields: LGBTQ elders are too narrow of a population for targeted policy supports; public policies should prioritize biological family and spouses; and inequality is largely, if not exclusively, shaped by economic forces that render racial, gender, and sexual issues as peripheral, almost irrelevant. These arguments speak to the tensions and possibilities between class and identity politics.

## Working on “Minority Issues” Transforms All Our Lives

In the aging and health service sectors, I encounter a rhetorical fixation with numbers. Aging advocates are compelled to demonstrate “need” to a variety of stakeholders, largely through an ever-growing quantification of the elders they reach. Yet this notion that social need is best measured by a population's size can impede the strategies of advocates who work on LGBTQ aging. While the most conservative estimates suggest that 1.5 million LGBTQ people are age sixty-five and older in the United States—and this population will more than double in the next four decades—this subject of LGBTQ elders is casually dismissed by leaders who prioritize larger populations or prefer to subsume queer issues within a generic “minority” framework. But isn't this concept of “minority” misleading and counterproductive? It's neither logical nor moral to ascribe greater need to larger populations.

We can destabilize the notion of a fixed identity (with measurable numbers) by focusing on the larger points of concern that LGBTQ elders represent. For example, if we broaden our focus beyond *elders* as an identity to *aging* as a process (worsened by various forms of discrimination), we see the many points of commonality between queer older people and society at large. The challenges that LGBTQ aging advocates address—extreme social isolation; discrimination in the home, the courts, and the workplace; a lack of cultural competence in health and aging settings; an unfulfilled longing for a safe and secure home; and a worsening quality of life that economic insecurity engenders—go beyond LGBTQ older people to the experiences of other communities across the lifespan.

## Expanding the Definition of “Family”

The struggle to articulate a policy agenda on queer aging also encounters another obstacle: the limitations of policy-based frameworks that prioritize spouses and biological family. Demographic trends show a consistent increase in the number of Americans living alone, and the available research shows that many LGBTQ people age as single people. The legal protections afforded by marriage thus cannot remedy the array of inequities facing older people who are LGBTQ. More broadly, the friends and caregivers that constitute the support network of many older people remain largely unprotected by the law, which leaves elders vulnerable in times of crisis and need.

Two policy areas where more expansive definitions of “family” would strengthen the support networks of all older people—and which demonstrate the possibility of linking



Sweethearts share a tender moment at a gay pride event in Harlem that doubles as a public health fair organized by Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE).

“The economic justice approach argues for stronger supports in the areas of paid leave, work-family supports, and long-term care and aging,” Espinoza writes. “The identity-based approach acknowledges that many of us, out of circumstance and discrimination, have forged families of choice that deserve new ways of thinking.” Here, a gay couple celebrates their fifty-four years of partnership at a pride parade in New York City.



identity and class politics—are in the areas of paid family leave and Medicaid. Much of the existing framework for strengthening paid family leave aims to support workers when their spouses or other intimate biological family members require care. While these laws are essential, they are limited in that they rarely protect married same-sex partners (denied marriage benefits in most states) or the wider network of friends, unmarried partners, and caregivers that are essential to most people as they age. Some visionary policy analysts in this movement have begun crafting proposals that protect primary caregivers—a promising sign for aligning worker supports with the modern “family structure” and for situating the realities of marginalized communities within an economic justice agenda.

Another opportunity for more inclusive caregiver and family supports is in the area of Medicaid and long-term care, an important safety net for elders. Medicaid is only available to people who are very low-income or who have depleted most of their savings to pay for care out of their own pockets. In this context, Medicaid provides “spousal impoverishment” protections to married heterosexual couples that protect a spouse who needs to qualify his or her spouse for long-term care under Medicaid from exhausting their joint income, losing a shared home, and ending up in poverty. While these protections exclude same-sex couples—a policy barrier worth correcting—they can also be reformed to protect a wider system of family, unmarried partners, and caregivers.

Both of these examples illustrate how economic justice can center queer families to everyone’s benefit. The economic justice approach argues for stronger supports in the areas of paid leave, work-family supports, and long-term care and aging. The identity-based approach acknowledges that many of us, out of circumstance and discrimination, have forged families of choice that deserve new ways of thinking.

Unfortunately, I have heard many leaders on the Left describe queer rights as too narrow of a concern or as a distraction from the global fight against neoliberal capitalism and corporate domination. These viewpoints shut down the policy imagination needed to better protect our families and unify our movements, and when stated too glibly, they effectively erase our perspectives as queer progressives from the Left’s economic agenda. We remain outsiders to the same political movements we’ve spent our lives creating.

Conversely, when LGBTQ movement leaders refuse to outline a poverty agenda that names the broader racial, economic, and gender dimensions of working-class queer life, we concede to this ill-conceived critique that the queer movement has no eye for class exploitation. The ultimate effect is that our families are rendered as a monolith and asked to suffer in silence.

I return to the image of my mother waiting patiently in her wheelchair. Her name is Aurora, which means dawn, and which symbolizes beginnings. She does not need to discuss the intersection of class and identity politics; her life speaks volumes on its own. It fills the silence and makes it sacred. I locate my spiritual politics in the questions that must be asked to imagine a better way to both live and die: How do we forge a more expansive political vision that makes room for me, my mother, and my father, and that rids us of the effects of discrimination that pump through our veins as we age? What’s next? ■

#### GIVE THE GIFT OF TIKKUN

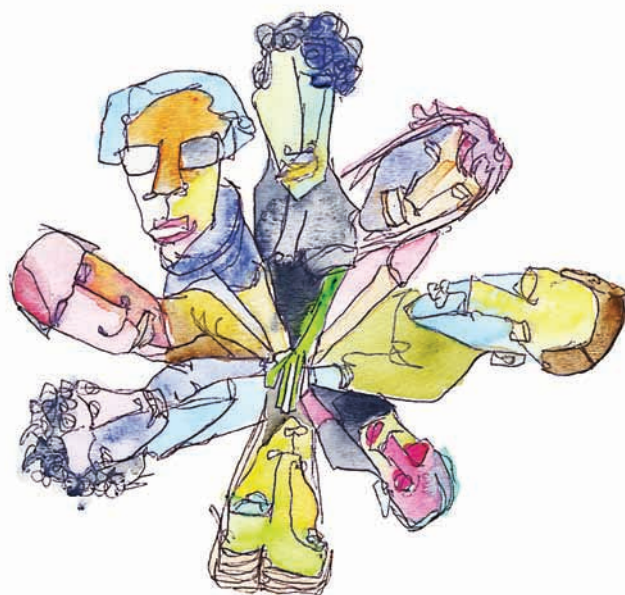
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# Why Identity Group Work Strengthens Our Capacity for All Liberation Work

BY CHERIE R. BROWN



**A**NY ACTIVIST MOVEMENT that lacks a broad commitment to ally building across all group lines—class, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and more—risks becoming narrow and ultimately ineffective. To say that strong identity politics keeps groups from advocating for each other misses a key point: powerful interests keep oppression in place by systematically encouraging divisions among groups, often setting groups up to fight each other for limited resources.

Divide-and-conquer strategies weaken us by pitting groups against each other. In the recent marriage-equity campaigns in many states, for example, anti-gay activists methodically went into Black churches to organize opposition, hoping to split the Black community and the gay community. Identity politics does not, in itself, always cause greater divisiveness among groups; rather, activists must be vigilant in resisting the divide-and-conquer strategies that can splinter progressive coalitions.

I'd like to share some insights into how we can bring together identity politics and class struggle to resist those divide-and-conquer strategies—insights drawn from decades of work with the National Coalition Building Institute, a nonprofit organization that I founded thirty years ago with the goal of training leaders on issues of diversity and inclusion. Over the years, I have worked with hundreds of communities, public schools, law-enforcement organizations, governmental agencies, colleges and universities, and

faith-based groups throughout the United States and overseas. Here is what I have learned.

## Strong Allies Have Strong Roots

There is value for leaders in being deeply rooted in their own primary identity group while at the same time learning how to be a fierce ally for all groups. Having trained hundreds of students, administrators, police officers, and community activists to become trainers themselves and take on institutional-change work on diversity issues, I can say unequivocally that the best trainers have always been those who are fierce advocates for their own primary identity group. For some, the identity group may be race; for others, it may be ethnicity, sex, gender, religion, class, or sexual orientation. For many, the identity is a combination of two or more groups.

Why has the ability to identify with one's own group proven to be such a key prerequisite for effective leadership? From my experience in working with groups on identity-related issues, those who say, "Don't put me into a group-identity box, I'm just human" or, alternatively, "I'm just an American," are often those who have experienced most acutely the impact of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is the negative feeling we have toward our own group. We devalue members of our own group, perpetrating the oppression we have experienced from the outside by turning against each other. I have found that there is a significant relationship between

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Cherie Brown (right) facilitates a workshop at the National Coalition Building Institute, which uses tools such as caucusing and speak-outs to build new sensitivities and alliances.

being a fierce ally for one's own group and the ability to be an effective ally on behalf of another group.

### No One Is "Colorblind"

Members of dominant groups are often the ones who rail the loudest against identity politics. In my training programs, whenever there is an opportunity for people to claim their group identities, I regularly hear the comment, "Why are we talking about all these group issues? We're all human. Isn't that the most important thing that binds us together?" This resistance to examining group identities often comes most tellingly from white people, heterosexuals, or men. When we are members of a dominant group, we cannot help but see the world through our own, often invisible lens of dominance. We do not experience the daily indignities that a targeted group does, so it is easy to conclude that anything less than treating every person as a unique individual, and not as a member of a group, is oppressive.

I often now hear high school students say, "Why are we focusing on all these issues of oppression? Racism and sexism are over. Don't blame me for what happened decades ago." This growing attitude that racism and sexism are problems of the past is behind, at least in part, the current legal challenges to affirmative action programs, with two cases now being argued before the Supreme Court over whether race should never be a factor in college admissions, even when there are strong arguments for wanting a diverse student population on campus.

When we do not focus on identity groups, we can miss key elements of oppression. I always tell the participants in our workshops that if I say to a Black colleague, "I don't even notice that you're Black. I don't see skin color," I would be lying. And my colleague would know I was lying. It is impossible in our racialized world not to see color. Nevertheless, well-intentioned people assert, "I just don't see skin color." They often back up their claim by noting how they grew up

in families "free of any racist conditioning." Despite the good intention behind this comment, there is a problem with this perspective. When we act as if we do not see skin color, we will also fail to see the oppression that people of color face on a daily basis.

I was having dinner with an African American colleague in the small dining room at a hotel on a rural college campus. She was expecting a Black student to join us for dinner. He was late, and she anxiously kept getting up from our table and going to the front desk to check on his arrival. Finally, I said to her, "Relax. This is a small restaurant. He'll find us." She responded, "Black men get stopped and questioned all the time in places like this. I'm trying to avoid having him face that indignity." I was oblivious to the impact of racism on my colleague. I forgot, in that moment, that ongoing racism required my colleague to have a different response to her friend's late arrival.

At the same time, if all that I notice about my colleague is that she is a Black woman and I overlook all the amazing things about her that are not specifically connected with race, that is equally insulting and oppressive. The great challenge in diversity work—and it is a challenge—is to be able to talk about group identities in a way that strengthens our humanity, helps to celebrate both our similarities and our differences, and increases our ability to see what we have in common with one another and be stronger allies for each other's peoples.

### Caucusing and Speak-Outs Can Shift Prejudices

One of the key mistakes that leaders make in trying to move people toward addressing the mistreatment of particular groups is misusing shame as a tool. Targeting and blaming rarely lead people toward alliance-building across group lines. Guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place. The more we label people racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic, the more defensive they become. At the National Coalition Building Institute, we've found that caucusing and speak-outs are effective tools that avoid this trap and help people be more effective allies for members of other groups.

In the course of a daylong workshop, we encourage all participants to caucus in a self-selected group to which they belong and in which they have either personally experienced discrimination or know members of their group who have. During the caucus time, members of the group prepare a list in response to the question, "What do we never again want people to say, think, or do toward our group?" Each caucus then shares the list with the whole workshop. What is essential to this activity is that *every person* is involved in preparing a report. We all learn together what it will mean to stand up for others. Hearing the caucus reports can transform the (*continued on page 70*)

Courtesy of NCBI



# Culture

## BOOKS

### Where is Home?

A Revolution in Our Personal Lives

#### *Going Solo*

Eric Klinenberg  
Penguin Press, 2012

#### *The Outsourced Self*

Arlie Russell Hochschild  
Metropolitan Books, 2012

#### *The End of Men*

Hannah Rosin  
Riverhead Books, 2012

#### *Coming Apart*

Charles Murray  
Random House, 2012

REVIEW BY HARRIET FRAAD

A TRULY REVOLUTIONARY transformation is happening in America—a revolution in our personal lives and intimate relationships. Many more people are choosing to live alone, the wealthy are increasingly outsourcing ever more intimate aspects of their domestic lives, and the viability of the traditional family model of a breadwinner supporting a stay-at-home parent is waning.

This virtual revolution is invisible in plain sight, precipitated by vast economic changes with wide social and personal ramifications. What has happened, in brief, is that the economic basis of U.S. family life has been transformed. Corporate capitalism

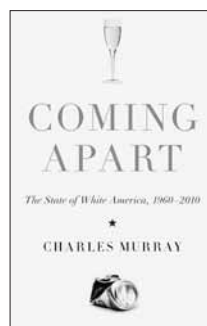
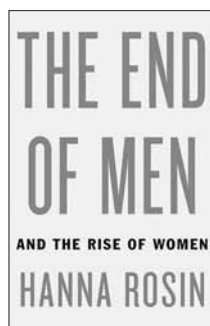
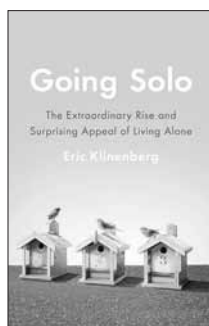
is the barely perceived elephant in our bedroom. Manufacturing is now outsourced to nations with cheap labor, weak labor laws, and dictatorships that force worker compliance. White-collar trades such as computer technical assistance, accounting, and computer programming are similarly outsourced for cheap labor and greater corporate profit. The few blue-collar trades that remain in America are increasingly mechanized, eliminating even more jobs.

The economic basis for a traditional family used to be the family wage that supported dependent wives and children. High-wage jobs were reserved for white males, of whom there was a scarcity. White men's access to the family wage began to decrease in the early 1980s and this shift was given a boost by Ronald Reagan's campaign to smash labor unions. Ironically, the Republican Party, in giving free rein to corporate capitalism, was the major force that decimated the traditional U.S. family that Republicans continuously endorse. Right-wing forces continue to deny the economic basis for the shift toward arrangements in which both parents work both outside of the home and within it. They claim to be concerned about the American family, but they oppose the vital family supports that other developed nations such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and all of the Scandinavian

nations guarantee: free child care, after-school care, health care, paid vacation time, paid family leave, and paid maternity and paternity leaves. UNICEF's 2013 report card on "Child Well-Being in Rich Countries" ranks the United States twenty-sixth of the world's twenty-nine most advanced economies, based on an analysis of children's material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviors, and living environment.

Since Americans suffer from so little material support for family life and since even two U.S. incomes can no longer produce the living standard that one "breadwinner" income previously provided, life with a family is increasingly difficult and precarious. As a result, living solo appeals to an increasing number of Americans. For the diminishing numbers of U.S. couples who still have children, emotional life is often outsourced or neglected, and families come apart. Wealthier families have far better durability only because they can buy the family help, child care, takeout food, and vacation time that 80 percent of the U.S. population cannot afford.

These different effects of the revolution in U.S. personal life have been the topic of four popular books: Hannah Rosin's *The End of Men*, Eric Klinenberg's *Going Solo*, Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Outsourced Self*, and Charles Murray's *Coming Apart*.



These books remind me of the story in which blind men argue about what an elephant is: each man touches a different part of the elephant and ends his search with the one part he touches. None sees a picture of the elephant with all of its interconnected parts. In discussing these four books, I will try to bring together their fragmented perspectives to bring into view the whole picture of how U.S. family life has transformed and why.

## Class Differences in the Experience of Living Alone

*Going Solo*, which describes the meteoric rise of people choosing to live alone, is a good place to start. Today, for the first time since the Census began counting in 1880, more than half of American adults are single. They are tied with childless couples for the distinction of being the most predominant residential type, more numerous than nuclear families with children, multigenerational families, roommates, or members of group homes. Manhattan alone is home to a million people whom Klinenberg calls “singletons”—those who live alone in one-person dwellings. Manhattan is typical of U.S. and European cities. The people living solo are not all aged widows and widowers. For the first time in recorded history, the majority of U.S. residents that the Census refers to as of “prime marriageable age” (between eighteen and thirty-four years old) are unmarried and live alone. This is a sea change.

Klinenberg enthusiastically endorses this development. He does not focus on its wildly different outcomes for people who do and do not have money, neglecting to mention the social causes that send so many singles into the mass of the homeless. Instead he focuses on how living solo can deliver respite to employed professionals who now work ten-to-fourteen-hour days.

Wealthy “singletons” who work until late at night can go to bars or restaurants to decompress before they return to the peace of their single dwellings. Younger affluent singles can get unpaid internships that better their chances in our increasingly shrinking, competitive job market. But the vast majority of young singles are not affluent and cannot afford to pay for restaurants or nightlife. Lines for computers at the public library are long, and library hours are being cut. As a result young singles seek company in less safe environments where police often harass them for loitering.

Older affluent solo dwellers who are either employed or retired can dine out, go to the theater, attend concerts, see films, etc. If they are at home, they can enjoy expensive takeout food and engage with social media on their personal computers. Wealthy singletons who become old and infirm can hire caretakers and car services to accompany them to social and cultural events so that they can leave home and stay socially connected.

Elderly, poor singletons, on the other hand, are often stuck in

isolating, dangerous single-room occupancy hotels. These are usually located in poor and dangerous neighborhoods. Many single elders don’t feel safe enough to sit outside or go to a local park, even if there is one to go to. As a result, seniors who cannot afford to pay for caretakers and who do not have devoted, local children, friends, or relatives are isolated and often depressed. This is a side of U.S. single life that *Going Solo* glosses over, failing to explore the larger social picture of which the rise in single living is a part.

## The Outsourcing of Our Personal Lives

*The Outsourced Self* exposes a different part of the transformation of U.S. personal life: a rapid expansion in the sorts of personal services that the wealthiest 20 percent of the U.S. population has begun to pay others to perform. Faced with frantic work schedules, the wealthy turn to “market solutions”: they hire wedding planners, maids to clean their homes, nannies to nurture their children, party coordinators and caterers for their children’s birthdays. Some prospective parents hire professionals to name their children or go to baby farms in India to hire baby bearers who carry U.S. parents’ fertilized eggs to maturity. By paying for substitutes in the personal arenas of life, wealthier Americans succeed in keeping up with high-powered jobs, but they lose touch with themselves, their families, and with their ability to provide meaningful services for themselves and those they love.

Arlie Russell Hochschild’s book criticizes the capitalist idea that it is possible and preferable to find a market solution to going through a pregnancy, caring for children, planning and hosting a birthday party, creating a meal together, and all the other tasks of family life. However, it does not explore the lives of the majority of Americans, whose work schedules are crippling their personal lives but who



cannot afford to outsource what were once seen as the labors of love. Naturally, the workers who perform these jobs for the privileged usually cannot afford to enjoy comparable services. A nanny may have to leave her children with her mother in the Third World while she cares for more privileged children. A party planner may be too tired to plan a party for herself or her children, and if she can do so, there will probably be neither caterer nor paid entertainment.

This book implicitly critiques the capitalist values that favor profit-generating work over the fundamental work of maintaining and sustaining people's lives. The drive for profit produces new industries aimed at sustaining over-committed people while depriving workers of the time to experience their own personal relationships. Although poor working families suffer most, all economic strata are deprived.

## The Rise of Women in Management Roles

Hanna Rosin's book, *The End of Men*, documents the end of male hegemony in the labor force. She acknowledges that the top-earning jobs are still a male enclave (women make up less than 6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs) but also shows how women are rapidly replacing men in the U.S. economy. Women have adjusted to the changed demands of the labor force. The qualities of compromise, negotiation, cooperation, and coaching historically associated with women are more in demand than commanding, authoritarian confidence. Women are now the majority of all managers in the United States and have the majority of all degrees beyond high school. Women are quickly catching up to men even in earning degrees in previously male-dominated fields such as law and medicine. In addition, women have taken over most professional jobs with flexible work schedules that

accommodate childcare responsibilities, such as being a pharmacist for a drug store chain.

Rosin does not focus on the downsides of this shift for the majority of non-wealthy Americans. While she mentions that many young women are exhausted but happy as they work, go to school, maintain their homes, and provide child care, she does not discuss the difficulty that most working women face in accessing decent child care. Nor does she consider the fact that 48 percent of first-born children in the United States are born to single mothers, who are the most likely Americans to live in poverty.

## The Decline of the Breadwinner Model

Charles Murray's book, *Coming Apart*, analyzes a real shift—the mass break-up of the blue-collar family—but it utterly fails to engage with the social, economic, and political developments that have contributed to this shift. Following in the footsteps of the racist “Moynihan Report” in 1965, which blamed male absence in African American families on alleged poor work habits and immorality, Murray claims that blue-collar men have become immoral, lazy, lacking in discipline, and religious nonbelievers, and that this is the reason behind the disintegration of the white working-class family.

*Coming Apart* shifts the problems of U.S. capitalism onto the shoulders of its victims. Murray and his appreciative media reviewers disregard the fact that just as African American men in the U.S. have long been denied family wages, now, in parallel fashion, white working-class men have lost the wages that supported their families. Blue-collar men now suffer low wages, mass precarity, unemployment or under employment, and the ego wounds that accompany the inability to support a family.

What has changed is not the character of blue-collar men, but U.S.

capitalism itself. Our economy has radically shifted since the 1970s, when the majority of white families consisted of family wage-earning men and dependent wives and children. The invisible elephant in the room of Murray's analysis is the capitalist search for profits. It is more profitable to freeze wages, export jobs, and abandon American manufacturing than to continue to pay a family wage, so America's corporate capitalists did just that. The family form that depended on the family wage is a casualty of the capitalist profit imperative—it disappeared with the jobs that sustained it.

## The American Yearning for Family Stability

There are strong reasons not to mourn the decline of the family form that depended on the family wage. Its stability was paid for with women's economic dependence, constraint, and subordination, as well as with men's onerous financial burden and loss of intimacy skills. It was a gender-divided family form that left both partners underdeveloped as human beings. Its logic often led to bitter marriages built on the financial dependency of women and the guilt of men. It polarized male and female gender roles, limited the growth of both men and women, and obstructed the deep, respectful, intimate friendship that can happen among sharing equals. Children often suffered guilt for failing to fulfill stay-at-home mothers' thwarted dreams.

Nevertheless, Murray's bestseller on the decline of this family form evoked a strong response from the U.S. public, tapping into a yearning for the sense of stability and security that white Americans sustained from 1820 to 1970, during which time a white man who worked hard and consistently could earn a decent wage and support a family.

Right-wing ideology like Murray's has successfully captivated many

Americans who feel that their family lives have been looted. The Right is the only mainstream political sector that explicitly and verbally supports the work of raising a family, even though it simultaneously denies financial support to every aspect of family well-being.

Secular progressives have largely ignored the bleeding U.S. family without advocating collective relationships and the social and economic supports that sustain them. And while many spiritual progressives have centered a vision of a society that supports the creation of caring relationships and families, this vision has not yet

been embraced by the majority of progressives. Rosin in *The End of Men*, Klinenberg in *Going Solo*, and Hochschild in *The Outsourced Self* are progressive voices. However, they fail to explore the ways that corporate capitalism and intimate life are closely interconnected.

We need to address both capitalist profiteering and family life issues to speak to the mass of Americans who are dispossessed in their personal lives as well as their jobs. We need to speak to the specific issues that all four books discuss without overlooking their provenance in capitalist economic developments. We have to

resist the relentless search for profit that unfolds without regard to the personal and social havoc it creates. We must confront capitalism. As progressives we need to discuss the personal as well as the political and economic aspects of life if we want to create a nurturant America for all. ■

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## Democratizing Wealth, Democratizing Power

### *What Then Must We Do? Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution*

by Gar Alperovitz  
Chelsea Green Publishing, 2013

REVIEW BY THAD WILLIAMSON

**P**OPULAR ACCOUNTS of American historical development suggest that American politics are fundamentally cyclical, swinging back and forth between periods of reform and retrenchment.

Following this theory—an idea espoused by prominent liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—the reelection of Barack Obama should have been cause not just for short-term exultation at the defeat of Mitt Romney and the far Right, but also sustained excitement that a reform agenda has been given four more years.

In reality, few progressives feel this way. The net result of Obama's reelection is a perpetuation of the

status quo in Washington—a gridlocked Congress that has bought hook, line, and sinker into deficit hysteria, thereby all but guaranteeing that the next several years will continue to be marked by high unemployment, austerity, and painful cuts at the local, state, and federal levels. Disturbingly, this climate is likely to foster widespread disillusionment with the capacity of progressive political leadership to produce meaningful change.

Could Obama have done better with the hand he was dealt, going back to 2009? Some observers argue that he could have gone for a bigger, better-crafted stimulus clearly tied to concrete, visible infrastructure projects on a large enough scale to bring down unemployment more rapidly and, in doing so, averted the loss of Democratic control in Congress in 2010. Perhaps by prioritizing economic recovery over health care, he could have short-circuited the Tea Party and maintained control over the political agenda. Others say Obama should get more credit for helping to avert a



depression and for passing a health care bill that, while flawed, at least goes a long way toward establishing the principle of universal health care as a right.

But what if this debate about Obama is largely beside the point? The correct question to ask is not whether Obama could have done



better (he could have), but what the frustrations of the Obama era teach us about the capacity of liberal politics to deliver meaningful change—even with a charismatic, intelligent president at the helm.

Poverty has gone up, not down, over the past five years. The nation still has no meaningful policy, let alone a comprehensive strategy, for addressing climate change. Labor is still flat on its back as a force in the nation's economic life. The defense and security budgets still command an exorbitant share of resources. Obama's health care bill, though it has important progressive elements, does too little to tackle the cost inefficiencies associated with a private insurance-based system. The nation's politics are as dominated by money as ever, and the Right has become even more extreme on many issues. Central cities remain largely neglected, investments in public transit and green technology have been minuscule relative to need, and pressing needs for affordable housing are going unmet on a mass scale. The picture is even grimmer for states and localities grappling with impossible budget dilemmas.

It is easy to look at this picture, get depressed, and conclude that there is no meaningful way forward and the nation is destined to continue a long process of economic, social, and ecological decay.

The challenge Gar Alperovitz offers—throughout his entire body of work, but most pointedly in his new, highly readable book, *What Then Must We Do?*—is to insist that recognizing the weakness of liberalism is not good reason to give up on progressive goals.

## Reaching Beyond Liberalism to a Bolder Paradigm

Recognizing liberalism's weakness is the first needed step toward developing a bolder politics with real policy substance that is capable both of

addressing key problems and altering, over time, the underlying power dynamics of the American political and economic system.

This is, clearly, a much taller order than simply electing or re-electing a candidate. But at this stage, the challenge is still primarily intellectual and conceptual: how to develop a new paradigm for meaningful change that takes us beyond traditional liberal strategies and their limitations, both substantively and politically.

Alperovitz shows how the long-term negative trends toward extreme inequality, high economic insecurity, and a lopsided top-heavy politics are the predictable result of the American version of capitalism—a system that concentrates the ownership of wealth and the ability to shape the contours of the economy in relatively few hands. The traditional liberal remedy—progressive taxation of income and corporate profits in order to fund public goods and some measure of redistribution—is too weak to offset the far-reaching consequences of narrow control of wealth and capital by a tiny proportion of the population. This is especially true in the United States because of our extremely weak labor movement and long history of using racial and cultural antagonisms to divide and conquer the working-class majority.

## Democratizing Wealth through Community Ownership

What then is to be done? Alperovitz's answer is clear: the remedy for skewed ownership patterns is to create new forms of wealth that are democratic in nature. The traditional socialist vision of large-scale public ownership likely still has some part to play in certain industries, but for the most part, what Alperovitz has in mind are smaller-scale institutions organized in a variety of ways to benefit a variety of “mini-publics”: workers who own the firm they work in, neighborhoods that

own part or all of a development corporation or an affordable housing development, cities that provide not only traditional utilities (water, energy) but also newfangled ones such as Internet access, while also engaging in other entrepreneurial activities.

If liberalism is weak in America, it will seem to many counterintuitive to claim that a more radical political and economic program—focused on the control and ownership of wealth—is *more* plausible politically than yet another rebranding or repackaging of core liberal ideas. But that is exactly what Alperovitz argues, drawing on two key observations.

First, as a matter of fact, innovative community ownership strategies are already taking place across the United States—in an astonishing variety of fields and forms. *What Then Must We Do?* provides an overview of many of these innovations, as well as links to more detailed information. The most exciting large-scale innovation is the Evergreen Cooperative network, which has launched cutting-edge green businesses, structured as cooperatives, in a working-class, high-poverty area of Cleveland, drawing on the buying power of existing urban institutions such as hospitals and universities, as well as on a variety of streams of public money. The long-term goal is to create an American version of the famed Mondragón system of industrial cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain.

Second, localities and even states are likely to be driven increasingly toward community ownership strategies in the future because they need to find new secure revenue streams and new methods to stabilize jobs for the long term. A city-owned business or retail development that returns profit to city coffers can help stabilize municipal finances without resorting to unpopular tax increases. A worker-owned cooperative that receives modest public assistance is a more rational economic development strategy than a

large subsidy to a major corporation, which is all too likely to move jobs to a higher bidder as soon as it gets a chance.

## A Checkerboard Strategy

Alperovitz's claim that it might be possible not only to craft a fundamentally different progressive strategy but also to put the goal of system change on the table is certainly bold, but Alperovitz is also a realist. One of the key new concepts in this book is the notion of a "checkerboard strategy"—i.e., a political strategy that recognizes that while not all moves are available on all places on the board, there is always a move (maybe even a jump!) available somewhere: some way to put creative ownership-oriented strategies on the local policy agenda.

Alperovitz concedes that there may be some places where the power dynamics or ideological winds don't allow any movement or experimentation. But there are many places—especially the cities and counties that went for Barack Obama in the last two elections—where much is possible, as policymakers seek creative solutions to longstanding problems.

Here there are two ways to see things. When one looks at what happens in Washington, and the way the Democratic Party compromises on issue after issue, and reflects on the power of corporate donors over prominent Democrats, one might reach the conclusion that the Democratic Party simply cannot be made a progressive vehicle. That judgment in fact is almost certainly true if one is thinking in terms of a "New New Deal" version of a vigorous national liberalism.

But what if one is instead playing a checkerboard strategy and looking for places around the country to build meaningful, practical models of community ownership that both spread the wealth around and solve problems? In that case, what one will often encounter at the local level are sincere people (often Democrats or Independents, and sometimes Republicans)

who ran for office because they wanted to help improve their communities, got elected, and now find that the resources just aren't there to enact meaningful change. True, such folks might eventually get cynical, settle for enjoying the perks of power, and slowly forget why they entered politics in the first place. But before that happens, they may be surprisingly open to fresh new ideas—ideas that involve democratic forms of ownership. This is where the weakness of liberalism and the prolonged period of economic stagnation and fiscal strain combine to create a genuine political opportunity: an opportunity to get frustrated local leaders to pursue something genuinely different.

In the long run, an ownership-based progressive agenda could reshape the power base of at least some cities and help form the foundation for a more powerful national progressive politics than faded New Deal-style liberalism.

Here it's important to understand that while Alperovitz shows that there is more room to move at the local level in the current political climate, just doing feel-good projects, let alone localism for localism's sake, is not the point. The aim of local action is not just to create new democratic ownership structures but also to create new power bases in cities and localities that can serve as a credible alternative to the corporate-led regimes that prevail in the vast majority of American cities.

## Creating the Basis for a National Movement

There is also a still larger aim: to develop a multitude of credible, tested democratic ownership structures that can be the basis for a national movement and a genuine alternative to neoliberal economic paradigms. A national movement cannot subsist on Occupy-type resistance activities alone: it needs a positive agenda with many practical examples of how

people-centered economic institutions can work.

A serious effort to multiply alternative ownership models would also give progressive forces a tool that was entirely lacking in the 2008 economic crisis: a practical alternative program. To take just one example, the Obama bailout of General Motors focused on the narrow task of how to restore GM as a profitable company while saving some jobs along the way. An administration (or political movement) committed to democratic ownership might have used the takeover of GM as an opportunity to undergo a massive conversion away from a car-centered economy. Such an administration might have prioritized job stabilization and community stability, and it might have sought to maintain a permanent workers' and public stake in the company to achieve those goals.

To put it another way: no one has a perfect road map for how dramatic changes to the political-economic system might come about. But there is good reason to think capitalism will soon enough be in crisis mode, and there will be nasty right-wing responses seeking to exploit that moment. A coherent response from the Left requires not just bold ideas but also practical examples to point to. Attempts to build democratic ownership structures should not be conceived as merely local projects but as part of a larger movement whose aim is to forge a credible alternative to traditional forms of capitalism.

So what is to be done right now? Read Alperovitz's book, look at your local checkerboard, and find (or create) opportunities to get your local officials to consider trying to replicate one, two, or three of the dozens of community wealth innovations now underway—or even start a new one. Then connect with activists doing the same in other places and begin building the infrastructure for a sustained political movement focused squarely on democratizing wealth.



That's work enough for the decade ahead—and a far more productive way to spend one's political energy than simply whining about Obama, the Democratic Party, or even the Tea Party. ■

THAD WILLIAMSON, an associate professor at the University of Richmond, co-authored *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era* (Routledge, 2002) with Gar Alperovitz and David Imbroscio. His most recent book is *Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), co-edited with Martin O'Neill.

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#### GOMES (continued from page 9)

that beset children in our evolutionary past, thereby allowing the child to more imaginatively engage with the world, Kirkby studied what kinds of play took place in different spaces. In addition to several play structures, the schoolyard included three “refuges” in which children could play unobserved, while still able to look out. Two of these were natural enclosures made up of openings into circles of trees and other vegetation, and one was constructed of two decks connected by a bridge. Sure enough, the children gravitated toward these areas in their play: although they represented only 10 percent of the play area, nearly half of the play took place within them. The qualities of each evoked different kinds of play, with the natural refuges being associated with imaginary play much more strongly than the built one (the bridge).

In another study from the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory, Andrea Faber Taylor and her collaborators observed the play patterns of children living in one of the ten poorest neighborhoods in the United States: the Ida B. Wells housing development in Chicago. The living areas in the development are divided into 142 low-rise courtyards, with varying degrees of vegetation ranging from barren to

moderate tree cover. Children in the higher vegetation areas were twice as likely to be observed playing as those in the more barren areas. Creative play, from pretend play to games involving wordplay and improvisation, especially flourished in the green areas. Other forms of play, such as conventional games (card games, sports, and other similar activities) and non-pretend play with toys (such as rolling a truck back and forth or playing with blocks) occurred nearly equally in green and barren spaces. In short, researchers have repeatedly observed that natural play areas evoke a particular style of play in children characterized by greater inventiveness, creativity, use of fantasy, exploration of the environment, and longer play sequences.

### The Value of Unstructured Outdoor Play

Whether or not a child is able to play outside without supervision also has dramatic effects on his or her social formation. A remarkable study conducted in Zurich, Switzerland, in the early 1990s assessed the importance of unstructured, spontaneous outdoor play by surveying every family in the city with a five-year-old child. The researchers focused on two types of families: those who consistently allowed their five-year-olds to play unaccompanied outside and those who did not. This choice was largely based on the level of street traffic in the neighborhood—as traffic increases, a child's territory of free movement shrinks.

The unsupervised children played for longer stretches of time, had twice as many playmates in their immediate neighborhood, and also seemed more adept at resolving conflicts with friends. Parents whose children played unsupervised in the outdoors knew more of their neighbors and had access to more neighborhood adults who, on occasion, took care of their child. The parents whose children could not play unsupervised made many efforts to

make up for this: they were twice as likely to organize opportunities for their children to play with others, arranging visits with friends, participating in play groups, and making trips to playgrounds. Contemporary parents are on overload to do the work once done by nature and community.

Another recent family vacation brought these themes to life. A week after the trip to the river, Cassidy and I, along with my husband, were off again, this time on a journey to our favorite state park, a two-hour drive away. We chose this destination for its child-friendly layout: a walk-in campground with thirty tent-sites in the redwoods, devoid of cars. After the previous week with Julius, I wondered how our profoundly social only child would react to a camping trip with just her mom and dad for company. I needn't have worried. Within minutes of arriving, Cassidy had made the acquaintance of Sarah, a ten-year-old girl from the campsite opposite our own. About a half-hour later, the two of them were joined by two small children from several campsites away. With a few basic guidelines in place (stay within the car-free area and don't go into anyone's tent) they were off, a happy pack of explorers. My husband and I, somewhat startled, quickly adjusted to the newfound experience of uninterrupted conversation and began our dinner preparations. Cassidy, alone or with companions, stopped by the campsite every so often for a snack or a quick hello. The next morning we were greeted by two small faces peering into our tent: “Is Cassidy awake yet?” And on it went for the rest of the trip, the composition of the group changing as some families returned home and new ones arrived. It was an experience of ease and spontaneity that was deeply nourishing for all three of us.

### Overcoming Barriers to Outdoor Play

Slowly but surely, the research is confirming that children's engagement with

nature is beneficial to every aspect of their being—cognitive, social, spiritual, and otherwise. By prioritizing our children's inherent need for nature, buried as it may be beneath the attractions and demands of modern society, we can nurture an inner core of strength, resilience, and creativity that will serve them throughout their lives. However, there are many barriers that need to be overcome to make outdoor play possible, with low-income and urban parents facing a much more difficult task. Here are a few strategies that parents can consider:

1. Spend some time identifying resources for safe outdoor play, such as programs offered through regional parks or community organizations.
2. Consider forming or joining a "family nature club," a group of families that plans outings together. Descriptions, suggestions, and guidelines for forming family nature clubs may be found on the "Children and Nature Network" website ([childrenandnature.org](http://childrenandnature.org)).
3. When planning vacations, consider child-friendly walk-in campgrounds, or go to a natural spot with another family or two. Although few of us live in settings that support spontaneous, unsupervised outdoor play, we can create opportunities for these experiences on a smaller scale.

4. Take stock of family patterns of electronic media use, and encourage a shift away from screens and toward more natural play. Include yourself in this process. There are many excellent resources to support you in this transition, including the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood ([commercialfreechildhood.org](http://commercialfreechildhood.org)) and the Center for a New American Dream ([newdream.org/kids](http://newdream.org/kids)). Check out the documentary *Play Again* about the shift from electronics to natural play ([groundproductions.com/playagain](http://groundproductions.com/playagain)).
5. Cultivate a child's eye view of the natural world. Scout out child-sized, accessible spaces and search for natural settings that allow for unstructured play and hands-on experience (getting muddy is more appealing than a restrained walk on a trail). Remember, dirt washes off.
6. If it is an option for you, consider starting a garden in your yard or patio or involve yourself and your child in a community garden. For a comprehensive resource list, see [mastergardener.osu.edu/pdf/youth.pdf](http://mastergardener.osu.edu/pdf/youth.pdf).
7. Be thoughtful about when and how you start teaching your child about climate change and other aspects of the environmental crisis. The best way to encourage an environmentally committed future generation is to

allow children to connect fully and deeply, in their own way, to nature. As ecologically concerned adults, we can sometimes be tempted to tell children too much, too soon about environmental problems. Environmental educator David Sobel has a thoughtful set of developmental guidelines and suggests that, by and large, the bad news can wait until around age twelve ([yesmagazine.org/issues/education-for-life/803](http://yesmagazine.org/issues/education-for-life/803)).

Non-parents have an equally important role to play in overcoming the barriers to outdoor play in our society. Whenever possible, consider lending your support to policies that promote open space and urban parks, particularly in inner cities where access to nature is in short supply. You can also advocate in your community for school practices that balance academics with outdoor time and opportunities for creative expression. Finally, you can model alternatives to our commercialized, media-driven and achievement-oriented social values through the way you choose to live your own life and thus show the young people around you that it is possible to turn away from consumerism and find fulfillment instead through nurturing a connection with the natural world. ■

#### LADIN (continued from page 12)

to walk away from the self-defeating cycles of introspection through which I, like so many trans people, kept trying to determine whether my sense of gender identity was indeed my identity and not, as most of the world insisted, delusion, sexual fetish, or mental illness. The gendered artifice that identified me to others as a woman was to me a crucial sign of selfhood, a means of embodying and making visible my disembodied, invisible identity. It enabled me to speak as myself, write as myself,

teach as myself, care for my children as myself, make friends as myself, suffer, endure, and love as myself.

The artifice that enabled me to walk the world as a woman helped me recognize my body as mine and feel at home within my skin. When I lived as a male, I tried not to feel. Awareness of my body made me feel sick, buried alive in a not-me that was supposed to be me. Gender reassignment changed all that. Suddenly, I felt connected to my body—I realized that I *was* my body—and between the thrill of physical existence and the elevation of my estrogen level,

I found myself awash in feeling. But having had so little emotional experience, I had no natural responses to feelings. I almost never cried when I was a man. Should I cry now, and if so, when? When I was in pain? When I was sad, afraid, happy? When I met a friend, should I hug at the beginning of our interaction? At the end? What were the right ways to express feelings, the ways "natural" women expressed feelings, the ways I would express my feelings if I had grown up female?

I knew those were silly questions. I knew that everyone grows into our



own versions of human nature through a combination of socialization that teaches us how people “naturally” are, experimentation through which we discover how to adapt those inherited notions to our own needs and situations, and habitual repetition that makes what we do seem natural to ourselves and others. But I had spent my life longing to take my place among “natural” females. Now that I was finally becoming my true self, I found myself in a world of people who doubted, sometimes violently, the claim that someone like me had a place among the naturally male and female. Those skeptics took very seriously the same silly questions that kept me up at night: when I spoke as a woman, dressed as a woman, presented myself as a woman, was I doing the right things, the things natural women would do, things that would qualify me to take my place on the female side of the gender binary, or was I, as feminist scholar Germaine Greer has called people like me a “ghastly parody” of women?

## Haunting Our Bodies

I don’t know how Yeats would have felt about gender reassignment, but it’s clear that he would have been delighted by gender reassignment’s demonstration of the fact that human beings create and reveal ourselves through artifice. Intellectually and practically, I agree with Yeats; it’s silly to fret about whether what I do qualifies me as a real woman, and such anxieties tend to reinforce narrow, damaging stereotypes of what women are and can be. But I am still saddened by the knowledge that my identity, like all human identity, is not the revelation of some buried “natural” self but an act of self-fashioning, artifice, imagination. I grew up imagining that others, unlike me, really were the boys and girls, men and women they appeared to be, that their identities weren’t identities at all but natural, unchanging essences. I spent my early years in a silent argument with Pinocchio, sympathizing with his desire to be

real but unable to understand why he wanted to be a real *boy*.

And so it came as a shock to me to discover, when I began the gender transition process, that identity was so mutable that I could refashion mine in a matter of minutes. Because my height is within female norms, long before I had begun the medical aspect of gender reassignment I could walk into a single-stall bathroom as one gender and emerge minutes later as the other. For a couple of years, I commuted back and forth across the gender binary, sometimes several times a day. It was magical, but spooky. All my life, I had thought of gender as a natural law, to be circumvented only through divine or medical intervention. Now, I saw that both the male persona within which I felt imprisoned and the female “true self” I had longed to become could fit in the same shoulder bag.

Many transgender people happily express their gender identities via this sort of manipulation of the language and artifice of gender. But transsexuals are defined by our need to reshape not only our public gender identities but also the “bodily forms” in which we live, because those bodies don’t feel like ours. Transsexual writings are strewn with attempts to describe this painful, disorienting, often life-destroying disjunction between body and soul. Therapists say we are experiencing “gender dysphoria.” We say we haunt our bodies (when I played with my children as a man, I saw myself as a paternal version of Casper the Friendly Ghost), or that we feel like the living dead, that our bodies feel as numb as diving suits, as flat as cardboard cutouts. We can’t stop feeling our estrangement from our bodies, can’t stop yearning for bodies that fit our gender identities, imaginary bodies that seem as real and tragically out of reach to us as amputees’ phantom limbs.

There haven’t been many scientific studies of the neurobiology of transsexuals, but phantom limb syndrome may suggest a physiological basis for

our conviction that we are living in the “wrong” bodies. Human brains constantly map our bodies, distinguishing self from not-self, coordinating relationships between senses, limbs, and the world around us. Male and female brains are physically different in certain respects, and the physical sex of the brain is determined by a hormonal cascade at a particular stage of fetal development. My favorite theory of transsexuality holds that if the normal developmental sequence doesn’t occur, the result is a more or less physically male or female brain in a body of the opposite sex. This theory is supported by a study of six dead male-to-female transsexual brains that showed distinctly female characteristics, several experiments that create transsexual mice by interfering with the gestational process, and recent brain scans of living transsexuals. These studies aren’t definitive, but they are suggestive: transsexuals’ sense that our bodies are “wrong” may, like amputees’ sense that amputated limbs are itching, reflect the attempts of brains that weren’t normally sexed during fetal development to map male or female bodies that aren’t there.

It’s comforting for me to think that there is a “natural” explanation for my “unnatural” gender identity, but even if a brain scan showed that my brain fits male norms, my sense of who I am would remain. And whatever the cause, transsexuals’ sense of gender identity is so profoundly at odds with the sex of our bodies that we endure enormous costs—physical pain, social exile, loss of family, home, profession—in order to make those bodies, and the lives we live through them, better reflect our souls.

For many, that’s what seems most unnatural about gender transition—our insistence on altering apparently healthy bodies in response to feelings non-transsexuals can’t imagine. Of course, many of the ways transsexuals alter our bodies during transition *are* “natural,” or rather common, practice among human beings, who in every time or place seem driven to refashion

our bodily forms by shaving, trimming, clothing, coloring, scenting, and otherwise physically modifying ourselves to reflect personal preferences and social norms. I did a lot of shaving during transition, but so do many “natural” women and men. I got my ears pierced, I bought new and very different clothes, and I started wearing makeup. Such behaviors might seem unnatural because they violate social norms for male gender expression. But as I’ve learned during fifty-odd years in which it’s become common for women to wear jeans and men to wear earrings, it’s natural for the social norms we dub “human nature” to change.

## Hormone Replacement Therapy

Ear piercing is common among both men and women these days, but only transsexuals modify the sexual characteristics of our bodies. None of those interventions are natural—this is Western medicine we are talking about—but the most important, hormone replacement therapy, actually prompts our bodies to naturally change themselves. Most “secondary sex characteristics,” the physical traits that lead us to identify someone as male or female—presence or absence of breasts, proportion and distribution of fat and muscle, type and distribution of hair—are responses to the ratio of sex hormones. When female sex hormones predominate, our bodies respond by expressing traits associated with female bodies; when male sex hormones predominate, our bodies respond by expressing male characteristics.

Hormone replacement therapy isn’t only, or even primarily, for transsexuals. Many genetically female women undergo it, taking artificial estrogens and progesterones for menopause, birth control, and medical conditions that have nothing to do with gender reassignment. Genetically male men undergo it too, taking testosterone for conditions ranging from prostate cancer to sexual dysfunction.

But as its name suggests, for non-trans people, hormone replacement therapy is designed to replace what doctors have determined is the natural, normal, or healthy level of sex hormones. For transsexuals, the purpose is to shift our bodies’ natural ratio of male and female sex hormones (human bodies naturally produce both) to ratios associated with the opposite sex.

The result of this shift is a natural process: adolescence. For most of us, adolescence refers to the one-time process of transforming children’s bodies into the bodies of men and women. For transsexuals, hormone replacement therapy prompts a second adolescence. As my endocrinologist’s treatments decreased my testosterone level below male norms and increased my estrogen level to female norms, my body naturally responded by growing breasts, moving fat cells from my cheeks and stomach to my hips and buttocks, thinning my body hair, softening my skin, slowing my metabolism, and otherwise acting like a female body. Had I undergone hormone replacement treatment before my testosterone levels began to rise when I was thirteen, apart from my chromosomes, internal organs, and genitalia, I would be physically indistinguishable from any “natural” woman. But it isn’t natural to go through a second adolescence, and some of the changes of my first can’t be undone: neither my voice, nor my bone composition and skeletal structure, nor my voice box was changed by hormone replacement therapy.

Though the results of my medically induced second adolescence fall short of a natural female body, I thank God every day I wake up and my sleepy brain finds itself in a body that feels like mine.

## Living Beyond Binaries

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who fit binary categories (male and female, natural and unnatural, and so on), and people like me, who don’t. It’s natural for human

minds to sort nonbinary phenomena into binary categories, it’s natural for human cultures to ensconce binaries as the cornerstones of worldviews and values systems, and it’s natural for human psyches to cling to and defend binary categories when confronted with category-confounding people like me.

But binary categories are as artificial as the binary ones and zeroes of computer languages. If you look hard enough at any aspect of nature, you will find things that defy the either/ors of binary classification. The binary categories of “life” and “nonlife” seem to cover all the possibilities, but virologists and EMTs trying to revive heart attack victims can testify to the crowded murk between them. The interminable American debate over abortion demonstrates how desperate we are, and how futile it can be, to try to reduce humanity to binary categories like fetus and person.

Given the human propensity for binary thinking, it’s understandable that many people aren’t sure what to do with folks like me: which pronouns to use (common courtesy dictates using the pronouns we prefer, but things get more complicated when it comes to identifying us as mothers or fathers, sons or daughters, sisters or brothers, or referring to past and present versions of us) or whether to admit us into same-sex groups or spaces (bathrooms, locker rooms, public showers, dormitories, prisons, same-sex colleges, women-only events, rape-crisis hotlines and shelters, gender-limited religious roles like Catholic priest, and sports competitions provoke some of the strongest disputes).

Some find trans people so unnatural that they deny our very existence, arguing that trans identities aren’t identities at all but sexual fetishes, symptoms of mental illness, or attention-getting stunts. Some say that our existence is an affront to God, society, morality, and the binary order on which everything, they believe, depends. A majority of Americans still believe that it is



natural to deny us employment, housing, health care (some doctors refuse to treat transgender patients), community, dignity, courtesy, and respect.

Once out of nature, it seems, we aren't allowed to take our place among natural things.

## Drawing Closer to God

Many (though by no means all) of those most inclined to shun trans people for our failure to fit the “natural” binary of male and female belong to traditional religious communities, which read the first chapter of Genesis (“God made human beings in God’s own image . . . male and female God created them”) as not only building the gender binary into the fabric of Creation but also sanctifying it by linking it with “God’s own image.” The rabbis of the talmudic era recognized that a literal reading of this verse—a reading that decrees that human beings could only be “made” male or female—didn’t fit the facts of human physiology. They observed that some children are born with what we now call “intersex” conditions, with ambiguous genitals, genitals of both sexes, or genitals that make it hard to assign any sex at all. The rabbis approached this not as a problem of theology (are these babies made in the image of God?) but as a practical question: how did such people, whom they divided into two categories, *tumtum* and *androgynos*, fit into the rigorously gendered system of Jewish ritual law? In posing the question in these terms, the rabbis made it clear that they considered intersex Jews human, Jewish, bound by God’s law, and part of Jewish community. Though they didn’t say this, it must have been clear that although relatively rare, intersex conditions are natural, part of the range of human variation.

Like intersex people, trans people don’t fit the gender binary decreed in Genesis, but unlike intersex people, our difference isn’t visible at birth or inscribed in sex-defining genitalia. Not only doesn’t our difference seem

natural, it also doesn’t seem real, in the sense that there is nothing but our feelings and actions to attest to it. But traditionally religious people build their lives around intense personal relationships with someone who is even worse at fitting into human categories or definitions of nature than we are: God.

It was lonely to grow up outside of nature, but even in the loneliest depths of childhood, I knew I wasn’t alone. God was always there, beside me.

Like most transgender children I’ve heard of, I had a close relationship with God, and even as a child, I knew that closeness was connected to my transgender identity. Because I lived in a body that didn’t feel like mine, I didn’t feel that I existed—and that sense of nonexistence enabled me to experience God as a palpable presence. I felt God with me, in me. I felt personally created by God (though I felt God had made a botch of it). I talked to God all the time and had no doubt that God was listening.

My family was Jewish but not religious, so I didn’t have any theology or religious authority to tell me that I was wrong, and despite the verse in Deuteronomy proclaiming God’s abhorrence of those who cross-dress, what I read in the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, seemed to confirm rather than challenge my intimate connection with God: God and I were both beings without bodily form or place in the natural order who were desperate to be loved by people who had both.

It’s hard for trans children to hold onto our relationships with God. As we grow up, most of us are taught that God can be found only through religions, traditions, and theologies that until recently were more or less universally agreed that God despises us.

Trans inclusion in religious communities lags far behind the still-contested inclusion of gay and lesbian people. But trans children today are growing up in a world in which there are more and more synagogues, churches, mosques, and temples that will tolerate, accept,

and even welcome them. Every year, fewer trans people feel forced to choose between being true to their gender identities and true to their religions. Inclusion of transgender people will require not only tolerance and accommodation from religious traditions; it will also require profound theological and spiritual growth.

The work of disentangling religious conceptions of God from what was long seen as the “natural” domination of women by men has taken generations and is still far from complete. But even religious communities that have renounced patriarchal gender hierarchy in favor of the egalitarian paradise of Genesis still struggle to think about God, humanity, or the Divine Image they share in terms that transcend, or expand, or otherwise escape the gender binary.

The gender binary is the idol planted in the Garden of Eden: we don’t know what “in the image of God” means, but we know what “male and female” mean, and the first chapter of Genesis prompts us to see the gender binary as a concrete, natural link between God and humanity. To truly include transgender people within Abrahamic religious traditions, we have to shatter the idol of the gender binary and face the truth that trans people embody—the truth that the gender binary represents neither the nature of nature, nor the nature of humanity, nor the nature of God.

However radical this may seem in terms of religious belief, practice, and community, this truth is as down-to-earth as a grass-fringed mudhole, where, without fuss or fanfare, binary human categories collide, collapse, and coalesce into more capacious, messier forms; where bullfrogs thrum amphibious hymns under gliding great blue herons; and where someone who lives as a woman after a lifetime as a male whispers, “Thank you, thank you, thank you” to a God who knows all about human gender and couldn’t care less. ■

WALLACE (continued from page 15)

The new health care law simply makes this use more possible and affordable than it was before. No violation of one's deeply held beliefs is intended here: a new reproductive health care option is now available to female employees who choose this option—or not—in the full freedom of their conscience and values, religious or otherwise.

During the recent presidential election, Billy Graham asked Americans to “vote for candidates” who “defend our religious freedoms.” As I think “the biblical definition of marriage” and “sanctity of life” are code for the Republican Party's resistance to marriage equality and abortion, respectively, I also think that “religious freedoms” is code for rejection of the subsidized contraception provision in the Affordable Care Act on the grounds of religious conscience. Evangelicals such as Ralph Reed, now allied on this issue with the Roman Catholic bishops, say the Affordable Care Act prescribes “mandated contraception coverage” for patients, whether they want it or not.

If religious freedom is the same as being opposed to contraception, and in light of Graham and others' appeal to the Bible in their anti-birth control statements, then what exactly is the biblical teaching about contraception? As in the case of abortion, in a word, the Bible says nothing about contraception. Zilch. Once again, the Bible is silent about what many religious conservatives insist is a sacrosanct scriptural prohibition central to America's civic and moral values. To be sure, there is one strange passage in the Book of Genesis about a man named Onan, who became the object of God's mortal wrath by refusing to do his family duty of fathering a male descendant of his deceased brother. The exact meaning of this story is unclear, but it does appear that God is angry with Onan for refusing his filial duty, not because of the means by which he realized this refusal (probably coitus interruptus, and

hence the term “onanism”). Be this as it may, there is no biblical warrant for judging whether contraception is licit or illicit in the Bible. If the Bible, as in the case of abortion, is silent on an issue that Graham trumpets as central to Christian political identity, then what is the source of his theology? Could it be that his political affiliation has more to do with his electoral bias than the holy book he purports to love, cherish, and follow as his life's guide in all matters of faith and practice?

Rev. Graham and other traditionalists cloak their moralistic Republican values in the mantle of the Bible when, in fact, the Bible says little to nothing about the set of issues—same-sex marriage between loving adults, on the one hand, and abortion and contraception, on the other—that they are using as wedge issues to divide “values voters” on the right from everyone else in the middle and on the left. What a sad legacy today for the Bible and Christian values: religious conservatives, while purporting to defend the Bible in politics, in reality are highjacking the Bible to defend their brand of conservative politics, a brand, paradoxically, at odds with the Bible's central teachings about the integrity of creation and the ideal of love and care for all of God's children. ■

LEVY-LYONS (continued from page 18)

## Seeking Holy Boldness in Everyday Life

After the crowd had regrouped around James and the fallen squirrel, something felt unfinished. The squirrel's body was still there, an act of violence had occurred, and the moment cried out for closure. So James scooped up the squirrel in the plastic bag, cradled it in his hands, and carried it across the field with a crowd of people following. He lifted it up in the air as everyone gathered around. Then he said a prayer, thanking God for the life of the squirrel and blessing the squirrel for

its next journeys. And then he dropped the squirrel's body into a garbage can. It was the marriage of fierceness and reverence that made this a profoundly religious act.

I'd like to redraw the iconic image of the religious person in our collective imagination: rather than the nun scandalized by a curse word, the iconic image should be James lifting up in prayer the squirrel he had just mercifully killed. It should be the ninety-year-old woman who refuses to be silenced at the town hall meeting about fracking in her town. It should be the construction worker who stands up for his gay colleague who's being harassed by the crew. It should be the teenager who joins a sit-in to defend her next-door neighbor from eviction. It should be the developer who repents and changes direction on a project midway through to create more affordable housing. It should be the politician on the Senate floor, quoting the Torah's teachings about a Sabbath for the land and refusing to prevaricate on questions of the environment. It should be you. It should be me.

As religious people, we face our lives head on, knowing that our time is short here. And so we live with a little fire and intensity, fierceness and reverence. We live with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our very-ness. We know that there is no time to waste on niceties when there is work to be done. And when unexpected crises fall from the sky into our sundrenched picnic, let's not find ourselves among the retreating onlookers. In a universe saturated with a loving God, nothing is so “other” as to be disgusting or beneath us. It is our task to roll up our sleeves and do whatever is needed, whether it be to share a kind word, to offer a stable hand, or to go and get a big rock. ■

### Volunteer at TIKKUN

Tikkun invites people of all ages to apply to work as interns and volunteers on editorial and activist tasks at our office in Berkeley, CA. Info: [tikkun.org/interns](http://tikkun.org/interns).

VON BLUM (continued from page 25)

African American assemblage artists elevated this form into powerful new realms of visual creativity—a reality Johnson refused to acknowledge, owing to ignorance or racism.

Johnson's sneering dismissal galvanized women and black artists and their supporters to mount a counterattack, circulating a petition with over 1,000 names, including prominent artists and critics, that called on Johnson to acknowledge his use of racist and sexist stereotypes. While this mobilization predominantly concerned African American and women artists, its broader impact extended to all cultural workers beyond the white male mainstream: Latinos, Asian Americans, gays and lesbians, and many others. And accordingly, it built a community of resistance and opposition that stems originally from sentiments and responses that could be identified more narrowly as cultural identity politics.

This same spirit of contagious community resistance was largely responsible for the momentous civil-rights fervor of the late 1950s through much of the 1970s, encompassing the non-violent Civil Rights Movement and its successor, the Black Power movement. The African American freedom and liberation struggles of that era constituted one of the moral highlights of twentieth-century American history. They energized and catalyzed several other agitational movements during that era, including the feminist movement, the Chicano movement, the American Indian movement, the gay and lesbian movement, and the disability rights movement.

The activist energy of the 1960s can be understood as an earlier manifestation of identity politics, even though the term itself came into widespread recognition and use somewhat later. But without identity politics, the rebellious 1960s would have faded into historical insignificance. The major gains of those times would not have occurred without

the sustained participation of specific groups of women and men whose primary motivations emerged from their unique positions of marginality and oppression in American political, economic, social, and cultural life.

## How Identity Politics Has Shaped My Life Work

My own life story can also serve as an example of how movements that emerge out of particular identity groups can have a politically transformative effect that extends beyond the narrow boundaries of that group identity. My extensive participation as a white man in the Civil Rights Movement led me into all my subsequent political activism, including opposition to all of America's wars since Vietnam and vigorous support for the progressive movements from the 1970s to the present. The African American-led civil rights struggle originated in what we would now call identity politics, but it had deep consequences for millions of people beyond that racial group alone.

The demand for ethnic studies departments has similarly had deep and transformative effects on our broader society. When I started teaching at the University of California at Berkeley in 1968, a momentous movement for curricular change rocked the campus, with reverberations throughout the nation. Thousands of students and faculty supporters joined the Third World Liberation Front in demanding the establishment of academic programs focusing on neglected and understudied racial and ethnic groups. Scores of protesters were arrested as they demanded that the university administration create scholarly programs focusing on African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos, and Native Americans. Protesters rightly claimed that all of these groups had histories and struggles that were ignored in existing academic disciplines.

The two-month campaign proved successful. Although a Third World

College itself was not established, an ethnic studies program came into existence focusing on all of the previously marginalized groups and set the stage for African American studies to subsequently become an independent department. These developments not only transformed teaching and scholarship at Berkeley, they also helped spread ethnic studies and women's studies programs throughout the nation. Virtually all major colleges and universities now provide some institutional structure for women and minorities to pursue formal studies in areas relevant to their personal lives and histories.

While these studies have special meaning to the specific groups about whom they are instituted and organized, they also provide outstanding educational opportunities for others to explore topics and themes that would otherwise be unavailable. Students, faculty, and the general public have all been enriched as a result of these newer academic programs, although many traditional academics still regard them as suspicious, academically suspect, and probably a regrettable result of fashionable identity politics. I regard my early and continuing support for this progressive educational innovation as among the most valuable of my lifelong political activities. Soon after I moved from Berkeley to UCLA in 1980, having fought vigorously to create African American studies, I decided that I wanted to participate in this curricular focus. My presence as a non-African American in this field reveals that its "identity politics" origins do not make it closed or inapplicable to members of other identity groups.

## Ethnic Studies and the Liberatory Potential of Identity Politics

My experiences teaching in this field offer constant reminders that activities and topics of special relevance to one group in America have the potential to build powerful bridges between



communities, rather than further isolating groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. My first African American studies course at UCLA was “Paul Robeson: An American Life,” the first ever course on Robeson in an American university. Traditional academic departments have historically excluded Robeson; indeed, Robeson and his magnificent accomplishments even now get scarce mention in departments of history, political science, theater arts, film studies, and others.

By focusing on the quintessential Renaissance person in U.S. political and cultural history, I offered students an interdisciplinary perspective that both highlighted the African American experience throughout much of the twentieth century and transcended that focus. Moreover, students were able to learn about Robeson’s profound humanism, which reflected his powerful commitment not only to his own African American people but also to all marginalized groups. When students saw how Paul Robeson dedicated his life to working men and women, to Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, to oppressed workers throughout the world, and to many others suffering persecution from those with power and wealth, they understood the deeper implications of his commitment to an earlier vision of identity politics. My experiences in that course and in numerous public presentations about Robeson and his life and work have persuaded me that his example has profound implications for similar political breadth for the present.

My experiences teaching about African American visual art have similarly enabled me to see how focusing on the cultural productions of a particular identity group can transform the consciousness of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and generate new forms of solidarity. Although some traditional art history departments now offer courses on African American visual art, it is still the case that African American Studies units more typically

bring the subject to students’ attention. The body of African American art understandably features themes and topics addressing the difficult struggles of people of African origin for centuries in the Americas. Many artworks address such painful themes as slavery, Jim Crow, physical brutality, racial profiling, and numerous other aspects of racism that have despoiled American history since the beginning of colonial times. Thousands of African American paintings, sculptures, murals, prints, photographs, and other art forms understandably represent a vigorous expression of identity politics in visual form.

The tradition, however, is much more comprehensive than that alone. Many African American artists use their talents to reach out to other communities of color. Dramatic examples exist in the community mural movement, especially from the late 1960s to the present. Many African American muralists incorporate Chicano themes, including iconic images of Emiliano Zapata, Cesar Chavez, Delores Huerta, and many others. In Los Angeles, some African American artists have worked closely with artists from the Korean community, seeking to bridge the communication gap between the two groups and to show a deeper solidarity in the face of common economic and political discrimination. Female and gay African American artists regularly use their work to call attention to issues affecting their communities as well, illustrating profound issues of intersectionality. When I teach and write about these artists and their works, I call specific attention to how one “special interest” focus can join another, encouraging viewers themselves to make their own political linkages. This process of linking one struggle to another reflects the broader liberating possibilities of contemporary identity politics.

Recent curricular ventures in disability studies and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender studies have also shown how specific themes can

generate wider empathy among populations that have no direct experience with the specific communities being highlighted. Thousands of heterosexual and able-bodied students take these classes and have direct personal contact and classroom discussions with people whom they might otherwise avoid. Contemporary educational identity politics, accordingly, helps break down barriers to human understanding and generate valuable interpersonal communication opportunities.

In defending contemporary identity politics against its critics, I don’t mean to downplay the legitimacy of concerns over fragmentation. I have witnessed some distressing fragmentation among various groups whose political agendas rarely transcend their own sectarian concerns. I encounter this most frequently in university settings among faculty and students representing specific oppressed groups. I have had African American students for whom any concerns other than justice and decency for their own people are too easily dismissed or relegated to marginal concern. A few of my politically engaged women students seem unwilling to pursue topics that depart from issues of gender equality. Likewise, I have had gay and lesbian students who seem reluctant to address topics other than those that pertain to their sexual orientation.

All of this is perfectly understandable in a society that has ignored and oppressed each of these groups for decades, even centuries. But this resistance to engaging with each other’s struggles is nevertheless insufficient. The great promise of identity politics is its ability to raise powerful consciousness among oppressed groups of people and also build bridges among those groups. When that occurs, the results have the power to create more permanent alliances that challenge the egregious injustices that still pervade American society and politics. Our difficult task is to move relentlessly in that direction. ■

Democratic Party completely in thrall to the banks and the insurance companies that gains liberal credibility by asserting various forms of individual rights for oppressed groups. This will not change the fact that the United States has developed a third-world-style class structure that is utterly different from any other developed society. To understand the oppression of women and blacks, we have to understand their place in that class structure.

### The Case of Paul Robeson

Let me now address the example that Von Blum gives of Paul Robeson. No one can know how happy I am to hear of his course on Robeson, one of the most cruelly neglected and stigmatized Americans of all time. But Von Blum's account of Robeson's life misses a crucial point. Von Blum offers Robeson as an object lesson of someone committed to his own African American people but also able to transcend that commitment through what he calls Robeson's "profound humanism." But in fact what allowed Robeson to transcend a narrow racial politics was Communism, not humanism. Von Blum doesn't even mention Communism in regard to his course on Robeson, an omission Robeson would never have stood for! Even as we recognize that Robeson's failure to condemn Stalinism *was* a failure, so we have to recognize that his artistic achievements, political leadership, global role, place in the history of the labor movement, and so forth were all the results of his Communist ideas and party membership, which gave him his standpoint and base of support.

While Robeson undeniably suffered because he was black, he was primarily persecuted because of his Communism. After World War II, when Robeson's fame was at its height, the U.S. government sent famous African American artists like Louis Armstrong around the world to perform in order to counter Cold War Soviet charges

of American racism. Robeson, a great singer and actor, was never sent. On the contrary, the government was at that very moment trying to destroy his life by preventing him from appearing in public.

The point to be learned from Robeson's life is not that one can transcend identity politics through humanism and become a fighter for all peoples, but rather that America's rulers can happily tolerate and co-opt expressions of identity politics that do not challenge capitalism but will mercilessly squash leftist struggles that resist class oppression alongside other forms of oppression.

Just recall the persecution of other great black leaders and writers shaped by the Popular Front. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois, one of our greatest historians, was marginalized in the same way that Robeson was. Richard Wright was portrayed as "too angry" and "out of touch" by a new generation of blacks who saw themselves as "omni-American." Martin Luther King was redbaited and harassed by the FBI, and even today is portrayed as a mainstream liberal, for example, in the selection of quotations that adorn his statue in Washington. Missing from King's monument are such remarks as the following: "I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos, without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government."

### The Difference Between the Historic Left and 1970s Identity Politics

To conclude: Von Blum seems to take for granted a dichotomy that was invented in the Seventies: the Left vs. identity politics. The assumption seems to be that the Left was only concerned with white men and their economic interests until the proponents of identity politics pointed out that there were women and blacks and gays present. In fact the abolitionists, who were both

black and white, created the first American Left, inventing its characteristic tactic, namely agitation, when they rejected the idea that African Americans should be returned to Africa.

Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was not the product of some stand-alone feminist consciousness, unknown to the Left. Rather it is a Jacobin work, intrinsic to the French Revolution. Its central point is the analogy between the illegitimate power of nobles and that of husbands. As any reasonable, historical work on the Left will show, the modern Left's origins lay in the critique of the family and private property during the Protestant Reformation, so that many of the issues that appear to some to have emerged in the 1970s have actually been discussed for centuries.

The difference between the historic Left and the identity politics that emerged in the Seventies is not that only the latter addresses race, gender, and sex. Rather, the historic Left—or, better, the universalist ideals created in the eighteenth century—frame our choices in terms of what we believe and what we are to do. That framing makes it possible for us to recognize differences in the structure of oppression, for example, the fact that blacks (including black women) are demeaned and degraded, while (white) women are idealized in a way that infantilizes them. This is not a question of competitive victimization, nor of "intersectionality"; rather it is a question of understanding slavery, capitalism, and the connections between them.

Identity politics, by contrast, is concerned not with what we think but with who we are. *We need identity politics*: we need voices that speak for the pain of particular experiences and situations, and for the absences in pretended universals. But let us not mistake those voices for the kind of comprehensive understanding that alone can contest the illegitimate and often destructive power that rules this country and much of the globe. ■

**SPENCE** (continued from page 30)

blessings, and that the only solution is to “double down” on their faith by donating even more to the church and paying closer attention to the economic message shared by the pastor.

## Organizing Locally Against Neoliberal Morality Tales

Adolph Reed argued more than a quarter-century ago that the best we can hope for, given the drastic degree to which neoliberalism truncates radical politics, is to work to expand the ability of black and working-class communities to master political speech. We do this not by making overtures based on bygone eras, movements, definitions, or assumptions. We do this by engaging in the hard task of getting people to understand and contest neoliberalism and its local, national, and global effects on their lives.

I argue that we must continue to engage in national-level organizing and critique. However we must also work harder on local infrastructure, changing the nation by *first* working to change where we are.

This is already occurring. Dozens of organizations across the country are engaged in local living wage campaigns, are organizing foreclosure defenses, and are fighting back against student debt. But we’ve more work to do.

And while I’m loathe to suggest that politics begins and ends in the church in black communities, I will suggest that given the spread of the prosperity gospel, we have to pay attention to the spiritual arena. The prosperity gospel is not single-handedly responsible for the spread of neoliberalism in black communities. But we do have to work in the spiritual sphere to convince the people who suffer most from neoliberalism that it is their *suffering*, not their behavior, that is immoral. They didn’t lose their homes because they didn’t save enough, or didn’t budget enough, or didn’t pray enough. They didn’t lose their savings because they didn’t plan enough. They aren’t working at a dead-end job because they didn’t educate themselves enough. Just as the prosperity gospel (and neoliberalism in general) works through a combination of reason, emotion, and morality, we have to lash our political projects to new morality tales. Churches are natural

homes within which to seed and begin to spread these messages.

It should be relatively straightforward, for example, to spread anti-debt messages within churches. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are replete with messages arguing debt itself is immoral.

*Tikkun’s* “Spiritual Covenant with America” ([tikkun.org/covenant](http://tikkun.org/covenant)) calls for a New Bottom Line that “judges institutions, corporations, legislation, social practices, health care, our educational and legal systems, and our social policies by how much love and compassion, kindness and generosity, and ethical and ecological sensitivity they inculcate within us, and by how much they nurture our capacity to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred.” I support this project and believe it is one worth fighting for. However to the extent that support for the prosperity gospel within black communities makes this project difficult to imagine, it behooves us to imagine innovative ways to contest its stranglehold. ■

**PINKARD** (continued from page 35)

## White Supremacy and the Limitations of Identity Politics

Also mediated through the institutions of civil society is a deeply embedded assumption of the superiority of white people to people of color, an assumption that both shapes and is continually reinforced by our institutions. White supremacy is the handmaiden of capitalism, serving to fuel, justify, and strengthen it at every turn. It is not by any means a coincidence that the poorest places, both in this country and around the world, are populated primarily by people of color.

Some of the most radical criticisms of global capitalism and its hegemonic

hold on an increasing proportion of the world’s population have arisen from those most impacted by its effects—indigenous peoples, New World Africans, and queer people of color, many of whom have no illusions that the glittering promises of capitalism will ever deliver for them. So long as these criticisms remain on the margins and do not gain popular credence beyond communities of people who lack the wealth and power to translate them into action, capitalism does not need to worry about them. When these groups begin to organize around the criticisms, however, those criticisms must be domesticated. They must be labeled “special interests” or “identity politics” and must then be subjected to the pressure to find technocratic, “practical”

solutions to problems far too deeply embedded in daily life under white supremacist capitalism to be solvable in that way.

Campaigns thus come to focus on concrete “rights and privileges,” an attempt to gain something, to acquire something—some consolation prize—from the existing system. Under capitalism, identity politics becomes an effort to move from the margin to the center and so cannot have the goal of dismantling the locations of margin and center. The aim of identity politics is mostly to gain from the dominant culture some sort of recognition of oppressed peoples’ humanity and rights. Identity politics thus appears to accept the dominant culture as the standard, and it wants in.



In order to understand why identity politics cannot maintain a radical position vis-à-vis capitalism, we must reckon with the ways in which identity groups have been created by and for the establishment and perpetuation of privileges for a group that is declared to be normative—in our context, wealthy European-descended men. Black identity emerged from the defensive posture that was forced on New World Africans by the hegemonic structure of white supremacy in the American context. (Note: I focus here on the creation of black identity, since I am a black woman, but similar dynamics have played out in the formation of other oppressed and demeaned identity groups.) Thus, black identity is primarily constituted through and organized around the construction of “race” or “blackness” in relation to “whiteness.” It has always been positioned within the socio-discursive field of the dominant culture, which determines, at least in part, both black people’s identity and the ways in which white people maximize the hegemonic mechanisms of white supremacy to support and defend the overall production and maintenance of the status quo.

The racialization of human populations (by white men) permits the annihilation of chosen group identities; the degradation of human beings on the basis of arbitrarily identified traits such as skin color, hair texture, and the size and shape of certain features; and the consequent weakening of potential resistance among groups that might otherwise be aligned in opposition to the dominant group. For example, Africans were kidnapped to America with a rich array of cultural difference. Africans had no concept of blackness; there was simply no such thing. Whiteness sought to actively destroy the native cultures of enslaved people, seeing these cultures as a potential power source for discord and resistance. It sought to replace these ethnicities with a uniform “black” slave culture that was based on dependence. Thus the first construction of

whiteness was a blackness that was tied to the degradation of African cultures and bodies. When we speak about the limitations of identity politics, therefore, it is important to understand that black identity was framed within the socio-discursive field of white domination; black identity was constructed in the first instance under severely restrictive and repressive conditions.

### How White Supremacy Rationalizes Economic Exploitation

Because blackness was manufactured in the service of white supremacy—the creation and maintenance of power, wealth, and privilege for white people—it is frustrating when white men dismiss identity politics without first interrogating the most successful and destructive identity politics ever practiced (white male supremacy) from which they continue to benefit whether they care to or not, and whether or not they care to admit it. White supremacy has been and continues to be essential to justifying economic exploitation, providing a rationalization for the seizure of both land (e.g., the colonization of the United States and removal of native peoples) and labor (e.g., slavery).

To talk about resisting the hegemonic structural injustice produced by capitalism without talking about our differing relationships to capitalism—in essence decontextualizing and depoliticizing the creation, maintenance, and intractability of capitalism—is to ignore the fact that capitalism, from start to finish, serves the interest of wealthy white men and their beneficiaries (families). Although a few “exceptional” individuals of color may manage to gain some limited access to the spoils of capitalism (conditional upon their willingness to remain silent about white supremacy and to accept the tenets of global capitalism), no one has a greater interest in preserving capitalism inviolate than wealthy white men, many of whom represent the American government and

work with other wealthy white men in corporations to ensure that capitalism rules. Thus, we cannot talk about identity politics without talking about the identities of wealthy white men whose identity politics has throughout history consisted in “class warfare.” We must talk about whiteness as the vehicle of capitalism, and yet everything in the culture seeks to keep whiteness invisible, shrouded in a veil of secrecy so that the spoils of white supremacy can continue to be enjoyed by white people, and mostly by wealthy white men.

The racialization of human populations (by white men with recourse to the “science” of race put forth in 1684 by Francois Bernier as a means of classifying human bodies) is the power play that permits the dehumanization of social groups, the annihilation of group identity, and the consequent depoliticization of group oppression. Group identity becomes “political” in a visible way (as opposed to the invisible politics of white supremacy) when the social space that culture creates is violated. The pervasive, persistent, intractable racism that black people suffer in America solidifies a primary group identity based in a shared sense of collective assault. Black people’s bodies, wherever they go, are constantly signifying; white supremacy begins with the degradation of the African body, which is marked out as different and disgusting and thus subject to economic and political oppression as well as violence and every form of molestation, whereas white bodies are the unmarked marker, the stand-in for normalcy and rightness. In this cauldron of suffering is black identity politics born. It gains its power by connecting oppressed groups to a tradition of struggle, faith, and hope in resisting just this structure of totalizing oppression.

### White Male Identity Politics

It is not just inadequate but offensive, given the success of white male identity politics in amassing wealth, power, and status for wealthy white men, to

say that identity politics doesn't matter or isn't effective: white identity politics has been the most effective means in history of ruling the world and has done so by attempting to sever people of color from their histories of struggle, faith, and hope. It is not true that all we need to do is turn away from identity politics and prioritize the struggle against capitalism, nor is it true that if we address the economic system, racism will no longer be a problem—both sentiments heard more frequently since the 2008 economic crash, when many ordinary white men and women who had invested (materially and/or psychologically) in capitalism found that it didn't work out. Their disillusionment is real and important—they *have* been duped—but the con artist is not just capitalism but also its secret, invisible conjoined twin, whiteness. Together, these two literally rule the world.

Although there is almost no support for those who wish to acknowledge it, white people, too, have been destroyed by “whiteness”—the unmarked marker—which has enabled vastly diverse European and European-descended people to trade their cultures (the social space that creates positive group identity based on uniqueness from other groups) for power and privilege. Much of the discontent among white people over the last five years comes from the ways in which whiteness has only delivered its promised wealth and power to the elite. The majority of white people find themselves without much access and also, now, without the enlivening cultures that might have sustained them in its absence. Many of them then blame their suffering not on the faulty notion of whiteness—a fiction invented to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few wealthy landowners—but on a broken economic system, or worse, on “racial minorities” who have managed to eke out some tiny fraction of the American pie through “identity politics” or “special interests.”

When so maligned, people of color rightly point out that it is white group

identity that makes white people as a group believe they are entitled to more than they are getting. “White people,” they might say, “step into a world that they already own by virtue of the ways their bodies (do not) signify, and your primary complaint, white man, is that some white people have a greater portion of the world than you do.” And then these groups, for pointing out the unspeakable truth of white supremacy, are accused of practicing “identity politics.” It is misguided in the extreme.

### We Are Not Individually Salvageable

White supremacy in all its forms, including the Left's tendency to want to dismiss identity politics in favor of the work of dismantling capitalism, works against any ability to build principled coalitions to alleviate suffering, much less to confront global capitalism.

It is true that identity politics as it is currently practiced under capitalism cannot help us dismantle capitalism. Not only has it too bought into achieving benefits from the existing system, but it also assumes that separate identity groups can achieve liberation from oppression in silos. Salvation does not consist merely in saving more than 40 million Americans who are black, more than 8 million Americans who are self-avowedly gay or lesbian, groups of children, those who are differently abled, immigrants, and those who are illiterate or poor. It consists in saving an entire civilization.

Particularly in America, we love this language of oppressor and oppressed. Yet, what Americans through history have failed to grasp is that although constructs of race, class, gender, the body, and sexuality have been oppressive to people of color, the impoverished, women, and queer folks, when any group participates in the dehumanization of “others,” that group destroys its own humanity. I have grown tired of people saying, “What can we do for you—you poor, you blacks, you

women, you gays and lesbians?” There is nothing you can do for me. There is nothing you can do for us; it must be done for you! It must be done for the salvation of an entire civilization, of an entire planet. And that—saving an entire planet—is going to require all of us, working together and risking everything—you, me, everything that we have worked for—and continuing to do that forever.

### Transforming our Relation to Domination

Capitalism is ubiquitous and hegemonic: it uses the middle class and the poor to bolster its capacity to accumulate and generate wealth through parasitic growth processes, co-optation, and manipulation. For this reason, I believe that no frontal assault can effectively dismantle the capitalist system.

Therefore, it is futile to mount a resistance to 5,000 years of organizing human societies on models of domination by means of identity politics (equal rights for people of color, equal rights for women, equal rights for working people, equal rights for gays and lesbians, and justice for this one and that one). The problem is that no number of “rights” takes us outside the imperial framework. We can call formal equality progress if we want to, but substantive equality is more difficult when we are still in the same structure of domination that by its very nature demands that people be pitted against each other for survival on one side and for power on the other. And ultimately we create and recreate a self-fulfilling prophecy of ever more devastating individualism, greed, and violence.

As such, it is necessary to speak of identities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality; we must understand that we are not starting from a level playing field. We do not all have the same relationship to capitalism. And we cannot begin to understand, much less undermine, the workings of global capitalism without also

recognizing its often-overlooked conjoined twin, kyriarchy (the set of interconnected social systems built around domination), which is replicated continually in our organizing efforts and which can only ever undermine them. We Americans of goodwill are very cruelly trapped between what we *say* we would like to be (free, loving, generous, and peaceful), and what we *refuse to say* we actually are (parasites, dominators, supremacists, consumers of more than our share of every kind of resource). And we cannot possibly become what we would like to be until we are willing to articulate who and where we are.

However, it is not sufficient to articulate our identities through the categories of race, class, and gender. We must also discuss the extent to which we identify with the forces of domination and participate in relations that maintain their power.

## Interculturalism

I call this radical process interculturalism, a relational practice that, in my experience, leads to principled coalitions across various power-laden lines. Interculturalism means that we move beyond multiculturalism. Multiculturalism as it is generally implemented both accepts whiteness as the standard and affirms whiteness by mimicking inclusion, while truly forcing sameness. Within most forms of multiculturalism, only bite-sized elements of culture are presented. They are ripped from their political, philosophical, and historical contexts to be easily consumed. This inability to root culture in real circumstances or to discuss injustice in a meaningful way reinforces the lie that “everything is just fine.” It makes white people feel that the dismembered parts of the cultures that they are allowed to consume—these culture McNuggets—are complete, wholesome, and normal. In effect, multiculturalism merely places cultures side by side without seriously interrogating the obstacles (power and dominance) that prevent authentic community.

Interculturalism demands that we interrogate cultures of power and privilege that work against our common life, while simultaneously working to overcome internalized forms of oppression. In other words, interculturalism requires that people on the upper sides and undersides of history interrogate our own cultural identities and lay down whatever cultural forms inhibit our full aliveness. Through deep, full-on, honest engagement with each other across traditional divides, we seek transformation into something new. We engage a gestational process that involves being born again and growing up again in a way that sheds the ignorance, defensiveness, self-congratulation, elitism, and paternalism that are evidenced in so much “social justice” and “diversity” work.

At a group level, this means that we have to transition from civil rights agitation per se through identity politics (campaigns for marriage equality, racial justice, equal rights for women, recognition of people with disabilities) to a revolutionary cause demanding nothing less than a comprehensive restructuring of American life—everything from its institutions and laws to its basic economic system. We have to be a threat to the establishment by producing a generation of intrepid revolutionaries relentlessly committed to modeling a way of life that begins to pull capitalism apart, brings about revolutionary change, and makes revolution go viral.

## Impractical Solutions

I want to make clear from the outset that I do not have a practical solution to the horrors of global capitalism because there is no such solution. Practical solutions would seek to avoid posing a threat to the current system, to preserve our lives, as we know them, and to ensure our temporal success. So, my reflections and suggestions are not practical. On the other hand, a prophetic, radical, indeed feral life of resistance that leads to liberation pre-

supposes both sacrifice and suffering. Neither stability nor success, as they are defined in the society, can be part of our criteria for a revolutionary “religious” or ethical life.

We are in a nosedive toward death, and to interrupt the death throes, we must of necessity buy out of the collective death systems of our culture. We cannot even contemplate real resistance without a commitment to extricating ourselves from these death systems, because these systems, by definition, are killing us physically and mentally and decimating the planet. Even if *we* continue to exist, our revolutionary inclinations are dissipated and our commitments thwarted, and we become catatonic zombie consumers joining in lockstep obedience to the existing death march.

Although many Americans criticize capitalist systems and bemoan their negative effects, we do not often focus on the degree to which our own lives as we have known them rely upon these systems. To the degree that we want to maintain our lives intact, we are going to balk at any course of action that truly threatens the status quo, because a confrontation with a system so entrenched is going to cost us our lives, either our physical lives or our reputation as “being someone” in the world. This means that any revolt against capitalism will need to be inextricably linked to a unifying (not unanimous) set of spiritual beliefs and practices that give us the resilience to withstand the death-dealing assault of the imperial powers and all their sustaining institutions and ideologies.

## Revolutionary Suicide

I call this set of spiritual beliefs and practices “revolutionary suicide.” This is resistance with meaning: creation and action emerging out of the struggle for life. It is not the supplication of protest, the futile hope for a better day, the search for love and self in the faces of children, the self-indulgent staking out of a political position, or the



reckless descent into disorder. It is self-determination with integrity. It is the assertion of life without apology. It is the creation that is disturbing by its nature. It is the willingness to defend what we love—life itself—with our lives.

Mikhail Bakunin, in his *Revolutionary Catechism*, reminds us that “the first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that [she] is a doomed [woman].” Until a revolutionary understands this, she does not grasp the essential meaning of her life. Once a revolutionary has reckoned with the fact that she is a dead person, she can get on with the business of asking who she is going to be now and how she will live out her new life. In effect, this recognition, acceptance, and engagement of death enables us collectively to move away from personal suicide—the taking of our own lives in reaction to social, political, and economic conditions that leech the meaning from life, devastate relationships, and lead us to despair. We move away from apathy, fear, despair, and inertia, and we move away from their resultant practices of addiction, consumption, violence, greed, and self-murder to *revolutionary suicide*.

When we have truly reckoned with the cost of being fully alive—deciding to love life no matter what—and we are willing to pay that cost, then and only then can we, intrepid and relentless, refuse to be props for the systems of exploitation, refuse to live extravagantly on the backs of poor people everywhere, refuse to be employed by death-dealing institutions, refuse to be “good insurance risks,” refuse to be saddled with credit worthiness that enables us to accumulate debt that fuels an economic death system, and refuse to pay war taxes. Then we will refuse a living death, even if this means being killed by the forces we are opposing because we deem it better to oppose deathly forces than to endure them. And then, even if we must die, in Alice Walker’s words, we will be “qualified to live among [our] dead.”

## Costly Grace

I do not have a death wish. I am not defeatist or fatalistic. I must point out, though, that it is way past time for us, all of us who are long on criticism but short on commitment, to ante up and kick in. The Good News is that this work is not new. We are part of a long tradition of revolutionary struggle that is often paid for with one’s own life. This is the essence of revolutionary suicide. Any people who struggle against a brutal and powerful force risk death in order to reach for a more liberated life.

“Revolutionary suicide” is what Jesus meant when he said, “No one takes my life; I lay it down.” This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he decided to resist the Nazis, confront the state church with its hypocrisy, complicity, and complacency, establish an underground resistance movement, and plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer made those choices even though he knew they would cost him his life, and even though he believed that any violence against another person is a sin. He was plotting about revolutionary suicide when he became willing to lose even his own “identity” as a righteous man. He was talking about revolutionary suicide when he coined the term “costly grace.”

This is what Fannie Lou Hamer meant when she pushed past fire hoses, attack dogs, kidnappings, beatings, and jail sentences to demand a social revolution at the cost of her own life. This is what Oscar Romero meant when he said, “You may take my life, but I will rise again in my people.” This is what Mamie Bradley meant when she said, “They killed my son [Emmett Till], but I don’t have a minute to hate; I will work for justice for the rest of my life.” This is what Martin Luther King meant when he spoke out boldly against the three evils of American society, “racism, economic exploitation, and militarism,” and then, fully counting the cost, said:

I don’t know what will happen now.  
We’ve got some difficult days ahead.  
But it doesn’t really matter to me

now. . . . I don’t mind. Like anybody,  
I would like to live—a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I’m not fearing any man. I just want to do God’s will. . . . I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I know that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

This is what Malcolm X meant when he said, “If you’re not ready to die for freedom, take the word ‘freedom’ out of your vocabulary.” This is what he meant when he returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca and embraced a universal humanism, renouncing separatist theology even though he knew that in the Nation of Islam that made him “a marked man.” This is the courage, the integrity of revolutionary suicide.

## So What Do We Do?

We stand on the shoulders of those living and dead who committed revolutionary suicide, and the late June Jordan calls *us* to action, saying, “Some of us have not died; what will we do, those of us who remain?” There are no blueprints. And there is no space of purity from which to act. We must begin imperfectly from within the messiness, in ways that respond to and engage with our concrete and particular contexts and circumstances. So I cannot offer prescriptions, but I can offer a reflection on how I have been attempting to grapple with some of these issues in my own life.

I engage in a spiritual/pedagogical practice and community of accountability and support called Recovery from the Dominant Culture, which is based on a twelve-step model. This practice helps me and other participants recognize our addictions to the dominant culture and dominant ways of being and work on getting free from them. Crucially, Recovery from the Dominant Culture emphasizes the recursive relationship between our individual lives and the institutions that structure them. Hence, the work is not only about

personal transformation but also about the transformation of society, i.e., healing the culture that makes us sick by contributing our efforts to projects that embody an alternative to the addictive processes of the dominant culture.

My Recovery from the Dominant Culture program has enabled me to understand more fully how I, like all of us, have been shaped by the values, beliefs, habits, and desires that make up the culture in which we live. I recognize that I have paid a high price for the privileges that I enjoy as a citizen of this superpower. That price is my full capacity for aliveness and humanity. I am no longer willing to pay that price. I am staking my life on the promise that more aliveness is possible.

As a result of my recovery work, I have had to accept and come to appreciate the fact that I am an outsider within my own home, in conflict with the institutional church and, indeed, the society at large. I have had to release many of the benefits and protections that come with “playing by the rules” and remaining non-threatening. This is not something I just willed one morning. Rather this has been an ongoing process connected to a search for meaning, connection, and freedom that insists on an unflinching commitment to integrity, i.e., radical attempts to align my life and my actions with what I value and believe.

For example, I left my job as a senior

pastor of a mainline church and, along with that, I left a secure salary, health benefits, public recognition and acclaim, and a respected platform from which to speak. My role as a “professional holy person” was in conflict with my soul—indeed, my yearning for an authentic, prophetic, transgressive, and free life. My search for deeper spiritual liberation has led me, over and over, through what Jesus calls finding life, losing life, and finding life again. This has not been easy. Some days it feels like I am breaking. The challenge is to remember that I am being broken into newness and freedom. This recovery process actually brings relief. I do not have to secure sufficient income or property; in fact, the acquisition of property and money restrict my freedom and mobility and disturb my peace of mind. I do not have to secure status, influence, and control over my life or over others’ lives. I do not have to secure my own self-interests through personal power and lack of vulnerability. In reality, recovery reveals that autonomy, though prized by the dominant culture, often forces me to bow down before the idol of my own will, keeping me enslaved to the human tendency to dominate others in order to get my own way.

Healthy, sustainable relationships rooted in a shared commitment to grappling with our identities in relation to domination are the bedrock of principled coalitions and mass solidarity

movements. These coalitions and movements enable us to cultivate an alternative consciousness, and that new consciousness leads to a radically alternative world community: No more *us* and *them*. No more save *us* by abandoning *them*. No more heal *us* by injuring *them*. No more free *us* by binding *them*. No more enliven *us* by killing *them*. No more!

Human life lived in God’s image, lived fully, is found in the crossing over from ourselves to the well-being of others—that is what love is. When we cross over from power to weakness, from strength to vulnerability, from inside to outside, from up to down, we rise above ourselves, we transcend ourselves. In other words, the descent into death of our own self-interest—this revolutionary suicide—is actually a rising, a resurrection.

If we are truly to embody revolutionary suicide, we must recognize and embrace the fact that there is more than one way to “lose our lives.” While it is radical to die for the cause of freedom, it is also radical to live for the cause of freedom—to live in such a way that we die to the destructive lives we have been living; we die to our lives as we know them. Whether one feels this tearing and release—a crucifixion and resurrection of the self—as the work of demons or of angels depends on one’s openness and commitment to transformation and revolution. ■

#### P00 (continued from page 38)

organizations representing caregivers, home-care workers, care consumers, and their families. It includes a federal policy agenda that proposes the creation of 2 million good jobs in the home-care industry over the next ten years. The platform calls for the establishment of a career ladder, adequate training, and improved job quality. It also incorporates a roadmap to citizenship for the undocumented immigrant

women workers who do care work, as well as a tax credit and other financial supports to individuals and families who are struggling to cover the prohibitive costs of quality care for their aging loved ones.

This campaign fundamentally broadens how we organize. We begin where the interests of workers and families come together. By bringing to light the stories of domestic workers, home-care workers, seniors, and people with disabilities, we are building a broad

coalition to engage all of the communities affected by the coming crisis of care: care workers, elder care advocates, senior groups, disability rights advocates, women’s organizations, unions, communities of faith, youth, and students. Rather than pitting the interests of workers against the interests of others, we are working to build an expanded sense of self-interest among a range of interests in order to create solutions that can work for all of our different communities. This is the caring majority.

## Coming Together Amid Demographic Shifts

Tremendous demographic shifts are happening. As a nation we are struggling with who we are going to become. The question is how we can work together toward more for everyone: more prosperity, dignity, humanity, and respect. On the one hand, changing demographics could mean increasing polarization, particularly given the state of the economy. We already see immigrants being blamed for the jobs crisis, while poor

people, working mothers, and unions are blamed for the debt crisis.

As Van Jones often says, “This is a moment to turn to one another, not turn *on* one another.” I believe that in turning to one another, we not only begin to heal the pain and trauma that has accumulated, but we also create the best solutions. We learn about one another, we develop more comprehensive and effective solutions. We see the problems—and the solutions—more clearly. Ultimately, we can’t afford *not* to turn to one another.

Building a more caring economy and a caring nation necessitates the broadest coming together across differences in race, class, and generations that this country has ever seen. It’s time to demonstrate that in the face of changing demographics and economic realities, we can unite to bring about something deeply important to all of us. The caring majority is who we are, and we must build this coalition in order to win the solutions we need. ■

**SUNDQUIST** (continued from page 40)

or “Asian” or “Caucasian” would match a DNA sample found at a crime scene.

Society once again, it appears, seems to be experiencing *exhaustion* (to use Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous words) when it comes to class and race issues. How have we reached this point? Why are we possibly standing at the deathbed of race-sensitive social policies and witnessing the re-inscription of dated biological notions of race? Why is society once again resurrecting “cultural” explanations for poverty?

## Democratic Equality and Social Inequality

I believe an explanation for the current post-oppression narrative lies in society’s long struggle to reconcile belief in democratic equality with the persistence of social inequality. That is, if we are to hold true to the belief that all members in society are equal and are entitled to equal and fair access to social resources and opportunities, then how can we explain the entrenchment

of inequality? How can we explain the existence of inequality that is often localized in particular social groups, such as the poor and non-white? How can we resolve the moral dilemma caused by the persistence of social disparities in an ostensibly “equal” society?

The honest (and accurate) explanation recognizes the primary roles that class exploitation and systemic racial oppression play in producing social inequality. The disingenuous (and false) explanation proclaims that society has finally achieved a peculiar state of post-racial nirvana, where any inequalities can be resolved through neutral, colorblind policies. The latter path has increasingly been followed by our politicians and courts, perhaps entranced by the false promise of moral absolution that comes with no longer seeing race or class.

To recognize the reality of oppression, after all, would require significant structural change in order to resolve this American dilemma between equality and inequality. It is much easier for those who adhere to a post-oppression worldview to instead rationalize the

existing social structure as fair and natural. Understanding one’s racial and class position as natural normalizes the existence of class and racial subordination and allows such a person to feel freedom from moral responsibility for existing inequalities. A willing shroud of ignorance, invoking post-race and post-class rhetoric, then, provides the post-oppression adherent with certain psychological and social benefits.

There is much that progressives can do to displace the narrative of post-oppression. We must all strive to interrogate racial and class privilege, while becoming active participants in the dialogue of social change. In order to lift this veil of ignorance, we must continue to challenge misconceptions based on flawed views of race and class in an educated and persuasive manner. *Tikkun* provides important conceptual space for this alternative “justice” narrative to be heard, and yet we must continue to seek out additional opportunities—community-based, media-oriented, and legal—for the voices and experiences of the Other to be valued. ■

**BROWN** (continued from page 48)

narrow work of identity politics into a larger, more accurate understanding of how all our struggles are related.

After laying the appropriate groundwork, we invite selected participants, each representing a different identity group targeted by institutionalized oppression, to share with the group a

painful story about a specific time when they have experienced discrimination. The stories that people choose to tell are often heartbreaking. After each of these “speak-outs,” we ask participants



to remember the person's story and make an increased commitment to fight against the oppression that the story illustrates. Our research has shown that, over the years, these speak-outs have been the most reliable tool for shifting prejudicial attitudes, breaking down barriers between groups, and helping members of one group become more effective allies to all groups. We don't change people's minds. We change their hearts. We can refute facts or figures, but stories get into our hearts. They shake us out of our numbness, leading to activism across group lines.

## Constituency Groups Generate More Unity

Constituency work in organizations can lead to greater unity. I have worked with school districts, public universities, national advocacy groups, and other large organizational systems that refused to let employees form an African American caucus, a women's caucus, or other separate identity groups. They were afraid it would lead to internal division, with employees putting group self-interests above the interests of the whole. Our practice and resultant research show that the opposite is true. Staff members who belong to a constituency group within a larger organization have a "home within a home." They feel that the larger organization supports them, and as a result, they are more willing to contribute to the organization as a whole.

The LGBT staff of a national organization felt betrayed last year when their organization built a partnership with a known anti-gay business. The organization asked me for help in dealing with the growing anger among LGBT staff members. I recommended that the organization encourage the development of an LGBT caucus. Slowly, over the next few months, the caucus meetings helped to restore trust. After listening to a series of caucus reports, the organization made a decision to end

its partnership with the offending business. The constituency-caucus work has continued, leading to an increased commitment of all the staff members to the overall mission of the organization.

## We Have to Overcome Individualism to Resist Class Oppression

Work on classism is not separate from the work on group identities. Economic disparities are inextricably tied to group identities. Racism, sexism, gay oppression, anti-Semitism, ageism, and all "isms" have their roots in class oppression. In part because of the history of anti-Communism in the United States, people are terrified to talk about class issues. They would rather talk about the most intimate details of their sex lives than to reveal how much money they make or what financial resources their family has.

When I work on college campuses, it is a slow, uphill battle to help staff and faculty see the relationship between their own struggles and class issues. They do not readily identify their struggles over long hours with meager benefits, job-related racism and sexism, hierarchical leadership, publish-or-perish policies, segregated departments, and chronic mental health issues as stemming from class struggles. Instead, they tend to view these challenges as individual problems, requiring an individual response.

Individualism undermines any political analysis that takes class issues into account. In the United States, the value placed on safeguarding individual rights often overshadows the positive contributions that identity politics can make. The recent debate on gun control following the Newtown Massacre is instructive. The Senate failed to enact even the mildest reforms in the face of powerful political forces that framed the debate in terms of protecting Americans' individual rights. The undue emphasis on individualism tends to

distract us from raising broader questions about the collective good, which includes not only public safety but also the broader underlying class issues. Identity group work, when done effectively, can help people recognize that their struggles are not the result of their personal failings but a consequence of larger institutional forces. ■

### EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

Average number of copies of each issue published during the preceding twelve months; (A) total number of copies printed, 5201; (B.1) paid/requested mail subscriptions, 3140; (B.3) sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales, 754; (C) total paid/requested circulation, 3894; (D.1) samples, complimentary, and other nonrequested copies, 352; (D.3) nonrequested copies distributed through the USPS by other classes of mail, 8; (E) total nonrequested distribution (sum of D.1 & D.4), 360; (F) total distribution (sum of C & E), 4254; (G) copies not distributed (office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing, returns from news agents), 1709; (H) total (sum of F & G), 5963.

Actual number of copies of a single issue published nearest to filing date: (A) total number of copies printed, 5123; (B.1) paid/requested mail subscriptions, 3048; (B.3) sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales, 754; (C) total paid/requested circulation, 3802; (E) total nonrequested distribution, 641; (F) total distribution (sum of C & E), 4443; (G) copies not distributed (office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing, returns from news agents), 1442; (H) total (sum of F & G), 5885.



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## Fall to Your Knees and Thank God for Your Eyesight

was my mother's usual response  
to my bouts of childhood whining.

I can't find my other sneaker.  
*Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight*  
There's no one to play with this early.  
*Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight*  
My bicycle only has three gears.  
*Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight*

It's a line best delivered in a rural Irish accent,  
but my mother didn't have one of those  
growing up on a farm in Ontario, Canada.  
Nor did she have much Canada in her voice.  
*Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight, aye?*  
was not heard in the hallways of our house.

Needless to say, I never fell for it,  
though it did create pauses in my trickle of complaints  
and maybe cleared some room in my room  
strewn with toys—small tanks and smaller soldiers—  
a little space to think about God and eyesight  
but not for long, of course, the demands of childhood

being what they are. And the repeated words  
sometimes made me think twice before  
whimpering about a bruise on my knee,  
or foolishly I would say the line just when she did,  
the two of us chanting *Fall to your knees . . .*  
which is as far as I got before she appeared

in the doorway and pinned me to the floor with that look.  
No surprise to know that nowadays  
I say it every chance I get:  
to everyone under this roof including the dog  
and under my breath to people on the street—  
this one grouching about the price of eggs or gasoline,

that one furious that the bus is late,  
especially when I realize those voices are mine—  
me peevisish in the bedroom, me bitching about the rain,  
me and my broken shoelace, me in the sand trap,  
me forgetting to fall to my knees to thank her  
for giving me the eyes to see the world, to regard these words.

—Billy Collins

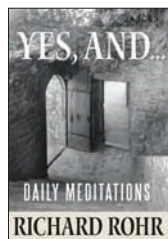
# Tikkun RECOMMENDS



## **The Human Spark**

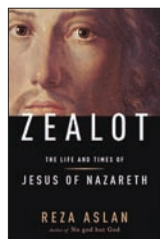
Jerome Kagan  
Basic Books, 2013

In his latest book, Jerome Kagan, an emeritus professor of psychology at Harvard and one of the pioneers of the field of developmental psychology, details the range of factors that shape the human mind, revealing many of the fallacies of neuroscience. He debunks the various pessimistic theories of human nature that condemn us to being aggressive, selfish, or otherwise unable to transform and heal the world. Every spiritual progressive should read this important work, which can be a handbook for liberals and progressives and a challenge to those who dismiss radical individual and social change as “unrealistic” on allegedly scientific grounds.



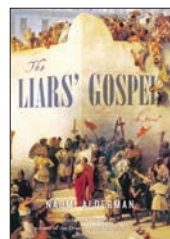
## **Yes, And...**

Richard Rohr  
Franciscan Media,  
2013



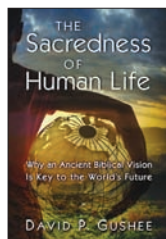
## **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth**

Reza Aslan  
Random House,  
2013



## **The Liars' Gospel**

Naomi Alderman  
Little, Brown, and  
Company,  
2013

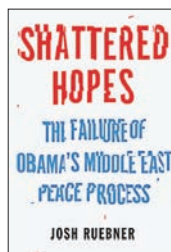


## **The Sacredness of Human Life**

David P. Gushee  
Eerdmans,  
2013

Christianity is in the process of a dramatic renewal, reclaiming the spiritual wisdom, ethical seriousness, and revolutionary fervor of Jesus of Nazareth. These four new books—when read in conjunction with Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, Father John Dear, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rev. Brian McLaren, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Walter Brueggemann, Robin Meyers, Matthew Fox, Wes Howard-Brook, Shane Claiborne, and Rev. Tony Campolo—will show you why.

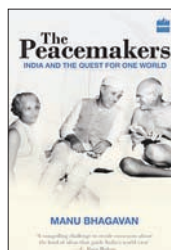
First and foremost, there is the great Catholic teacher Richard Rohr. Books of daily meditations can be bland and boring, but the meditations Rohr has selected for *Yes, And...* are exciting, soul-renewing, and deep. Reza Aslan highlights Jesus the revolutionary zealot who walked across the Galilee gathering an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. He describes Jesus as a magnetic preacher who defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem, a radical Jewish nationalist who challenged the Roman occupation and lost. Naomi Alderman's novel reimagines Jesus from the standpoint of his mother Miriam (Mary), his disciple Yehudah (Judas), Caiaphas the high priest of the Temple, and Bar-Avo (a Jewish terrorist against Rome). The reader comes away with a picture of the complexity and power of Jesus. Meanwhile, David Gushee takes the best ethical tradition within Christianity and shows how it still provides a significant and sensitive path for dealing with the complexities and conundrums of the contemporary world.



## **Shattered Hopes**

Josh Ruebner  
Verso, 2013

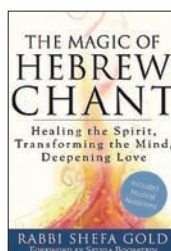
Josh Ruebner is the national advocacy director of the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation and at one point also worked for *Tikkun*, coordinating our attempts to present members of Congress with a peace and reconciliation perspective on the Middle East. In assessing Obama's failure to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace, he cites not only Obama's unwillingness to go to the mat with the Israel lobby over the issue of fully freezing Israeli settlements, and not only the scattershot, frenetic, lurching quality of Obama's policy initiatives, but also the fact that Obama's “approach relied solely on providing Israel with carrots” and never with “the proverbial stick.” He concludes that the more Israel deliberately frustrated and humiliated U.S. efforts to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace, the more rewards it was offered by the United States as a result. Ruebner's book is a stinging indictment of the absurdity of the Obama administration's failed peace process.



## **The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World**

Manu Bhagavan  
Harper Collins, 2012

The tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi need not have destroyed the huge support for a politics of nonviolence that he had helped to create in India and in progressive circles around the world. Manu Bhagavan recounts how Jawaharlal Nehru (Gandhi's successor and the prime minister of India) and Nehru's sister, Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, sought to create “one world” that would be free of empire, exploitation, and war. This proto-spiritual progressive vision was derailed by the Cold War and by China's anger at India for providing security for the Dalai Lama. It was likely also derailed by the narrow political focus of Nehru and his inability to build a powerful grassroots movement in India capable of overcoming either the corrosive psychological and ethical corruption of the ethos of global capitalism or the legacy of hatred between Muslims and Hindus. It's a fascinating story.



## **The Magic of Hebrew Chant**

Shefa Gold  
Jewish Lights, 2013

Shefa Gold—a Jewish Renewal rabbi whose Torah teachings and Hebrew musical chants have inspired the entire Jewish Renewal movement in the past several decades—has finally presented us with a definitive account of what makes these chants such a powerful avenue to connection with God. Mixing inspiring theology with musical notations and practical instructions for how to get into her version of spiritual chanting, Rabbi Gold gives us all the tools we need to expand our meditation or prayer practices.



# Tikkun Is More Than a Magazine

Through the work of the Network of Spiritual Progressives — the interfaith and secular-humanist-welcoming activist organization associated with this magazine — *Tikkun* is creating a movement that not only knows what's wrong, but also has a positive vision of the world we want to create: a world of love, generosity, social justice, compassion, caring for each other, and caring for the earth.



## Four Ways You Can Help Transform the World

**1**

### **Support our work by ordering a holiday gift subscription for everyone you know.**

Subscriptions to *Tikkun* (visit [tikkun.org/gift](http://tikkun.org/gift)) are a great way to celebrate Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanza, and Eid, not to mention weddings, births, new homes, graduations, and promotions. Many buy them simply to share the ideas in the magazine with someone they care about. Send the recipients' names, addresses, and emails to [chanda@tikkun.org](mailto:chanda@tikkun.org), and we'll send them each a gift card if you tell us the occasion. Yearlong subscriptions are \$29 each or \$41 outside the United States.

**2**

### **Create a monthly study group to read and discuss *Tikkun* articles.**

Invite friends, neighbors, coworkers, and members of your religious community, professional organization, union, or political movement. Send us zip codes within a ninety-minute ride, and we'll put you in touch with people who might respond to a postcard invitation. Don't worry that your home is too small — only a few people will come to the first few meetings.

**3**

### **Create a local chapter of the Network of Spiritual Progressives.**

Work on our campaign to avert environmental catastrophe and get money out of politics (read more at [tikkun.org/ESRA](http://tikkun.org/ESRA)). Or help us popularize our notion that "homeland security" can best be achieved through generosity — not domination of others — as manifested in our proposed Global Marshall Plan ([tikkun.org/GMP](http://tikkun.org/GMP)).

**4**

### **Come to our Spiritual Activist Training.**

Join with Rabbi Michael Lerner, Cat Zavis, and other trainers Jan. 17–20, 2014, in the San Francisco Bay Area. This is an opportunity to learn skills to help build a spiritual progressive movement in your neighborhood. Learn how to respond to cynics, defeatists, and "realists" who have given up on trying to build a world of love and generosity. Don't miss this chance to meet future allies and lifelong friends. Visit [spiritualprogressives.org/training](http://spiritualprogressives.org/training) for more information.

**For more info on any of this, write to [alena@tikkun.org](mailto:alena@tikkun.org).**