



HARVEST TIME

HARVESTING FOR JUSTICE - THAT ALL MAY HAVE ENOUGH

Sharing the Essence

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Living Into the Radical Alternative in the Heart of Jesus

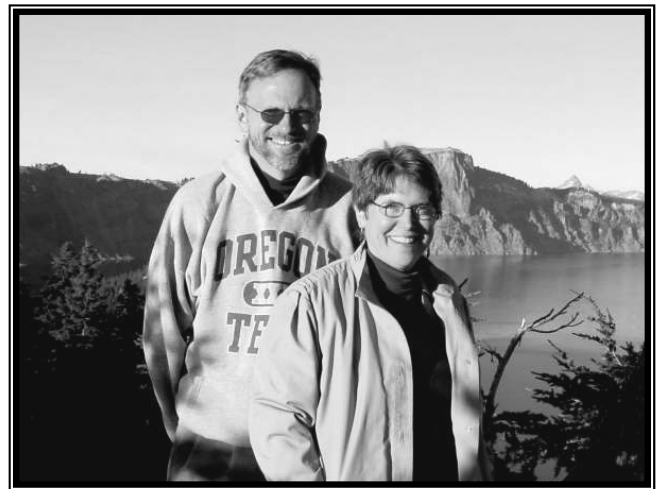
By Nancy Thurston - February 15th, 2004

I have worked on the intersection between faith and money for almost 20 years. In this process I have looked into my own heart and pocketbook, facilitated workshops and explored these topics in community. My life's work is to walk with others on this journey of following Jesus, especially in areas of economic justice.

My views about what is needed on this transformative journey are changing. I now focus on two aspects of this journey that seem crucial for a change of heart and life. On the one hand, healing and grounding are needed as we grow to deep self-acceptance. Some of this is personal inner work related to our own personality or history. But it also involves how we view life and ourselves with respect to race, gender, and class.

On the other hand, for those of us who are in the groups that have the majority power in the ruling system of this country (white, wealthy/upper-middle class, American, Christian or male) there is an added challenge. We are prisoners of the system in a more profound way than those who are the outcasts or second-class in this country's systems, especially since our captivity is often unnoticed because of its apparent advantages. We aren't necessarily actively racist (or sexist) but all too often we blindly take advantage of the doors that are open to us, not noticing when the same doors are closed to those who aren't part of the "in" group.

I will use the term "system" throughout this article. This "system" is larger than the political party in power at any time, larger than the individuals in the nation and larger than the customs and values of the nation. The system of a nation may ideally serve the common good of all people and the earth, but too often (usually?) it becomes distorted and serves the good of some and excludes others. This system determines the baseline point-of-view and who has the power. The biases usually remain unseen by the people who hold the power



Howard and Nancy Thurston

but its roadblocks are strongly felt by those without power.

I write from my own experience as one who is generally in a "power position" in this culture. I am a Euro-American, two generations back on my father's side and more than 10 generations back on my mother's side. I am wealthy by any standard with total assets of 1.78 million. I was born, raised and married in Texas and have lived in four other states since I moved away when I was 23. I am a life-long Christian, first Methodist, then Episcopalian now Quaker. I struggle deeply with the institutional church, which I see as so enmeshed in the world's system that it rarely proclaims the radical alternative I associate with Jesus. Despite my unease, I am firmly grounded on the path of following the God who became incarnate. This path is centered in Love (including my enemy and myself), forgiveness, non-violence, justice that includes everyone and the earth, and openness to the extravagant gifts that are freely given.

From this perspective I will often speak of my own personal experiences. However, I will also use the term “we” to speak of myself as part of a group of people. I do this because power is often a corporate issue, unchanged by the beliefs or actions of an individual. While there are individual differences, when I use the term “we” I am alluding to the general outlook of “my kind of people.”

My mother died 17 years ago when I was 32 years old. When my father died 2 years ago, I was parentless. And wealthy.

I am clear that my call is to get this money flowing into the world again. But there isn’t a simple or direct path. My husband and I will cover our two children’s college expenses and gift them a yet-undecided amount by the time they are 35. We hope to get most of the rest of the money moving into the world through donations, our life expenses, and possibly funding a yet unclear personal ministry. But it is a long and rocky road between here and there.

We gave away 25% of the inheritance as soon as it was distributed. This was an important step in letting go of our attachment to the wealth right from the beginning. I later realized that this gifting was the result of mixed motives. Underneath my genuine generosity were a couple of other motivating factors. First, I felt overly responsible to be a major financial supporter of ministries and people close to my heart. Secondly, I desired to get free of this money so I would not be what I was – wealthy. Unconsciously, I felt that the sooner I got it moving in the world again the sooner I would be free of the burdensome responsibility and guilt of being wealthy.

This desire to not be what I am has a familiar ring to it. For years I have been embarrassed to be a native Texan. With so many politicians and TV preachers coming from Texas, I’ve wanted to distance myself from this part of my history. Recently I realized that this is trying to cut out part of who I am, and it doesn’t make me any less a Texan.

In addition, over the past few years I have wondered about moving to another country. Given the shameful and destructive actions of my own country, this escape sounded better than continuing to support and live within a system I believe is heading in the wrong direction. But even if I lived in Canada or Europe, I would still be an American. And I was raised with the mix of corruption and splendor that is part and parcel of being an American. A move out of

the country wouldn’t change that.

As I have awakened to American and European history, I have seen the horrible things that have been done to humankind and the earth by white people. Slavery, destruction of native cultures, desecration of the land, and the institutionalization of racism and sexism was predominantly perpetrated by whites. I have always prided myself that at least I came from an enlightened family, but I have come to see that our racism was not absent but rather more subtle. I am white and nothing can change that.

Despite the separation of church and state, Christianity is clearly the power faith in this country. Since I often disagree with the interpretation of public Christianity I have tried to distance myself from this faith tradition. But, in fact, I am a follower of the way embodied by Jesus.

White, wealthy, Texan, American and Christian--all of these are part of the fabric of who I am. Each of these things has opened doors throughout my life, many doors that are not open to other people. In addition, each of these has given me life, brought good to the world, and has provided opportunities that have enriched my life and the lives of others. Just moving away from Texas or America, or giving away my money will not take away the privileges and gifts that they have already brought to my life.

So here I sit. I can’t escape. I can’t hate those things or try to avoid them without rejecting a part of who I am as a child of God. So an important part of my spiritual work is to “step into my skin” fully with an open heart and to see the giftedness as well as the mess of who I am, welcoming it all.

Much of the work for social justice focuses on the disparity of wealth and power in our world today. Too often this approach results in judging and devaluing individuals of wealth, rather than seeing them as people who are trapped in the system. Faith-based social justice work should speak the truth about injustice but it should also result in compassion for all who are trapped in the system. Those of us who are members of groups that have the power must face the world’s situation and look honestly at our lifestyles, but it is destructive to get mired in shame and self-hatred by trying to become something other than what and who we are.

We are called to respect and honor who we were born to be and who we are in our deepest selves. We

will not go far in internalizing the radical alternative that Jesus heralds if we do so from a place of denial and shame. We will be much more powerful if we can step out from a place of honoring the fullness of who we are as individuals, of our history and our lives, and let go of the baggage that we are damned before we start.

There is an irony here. In our world today, especially in America, wealth is the goal of life, and whiteness is the norm (even as the racial diversity of America increases, the “white way” is still the standard for behavior). Almost all of our advertising fans a desire for money, power and possessions and reaffirms their status in the system. But for those of us who are called to live in an alternative system with a different allegiance, these same characteristics create internal conflict. We are striving to be faithful disciples, but find that this path too often leads to paralyzing shame and guilt. So it isn’t surprising that we have a hard time believing that we are loved, just as we are.

And yet, we must embrace who we are – not just for our own spiritual health but for the sake of the world. As we become more accepting of our own goodness it will alter the way we are in the world. We can be more present to other people when we are grounded in the self-love Jesus affirmed when he instructed us to “Love our neighbor as ourselves.” When we can do that, our actions will come from a place of being grounded and fully present to ourselves and life as it unfolds. That is infinitely more powerful than starting from a place of trying not to be who we are.

It is vital that we work together, everyone offering the fullness of her or his own wisdom and life experience. When each of us can do that from a solid place of self-acceptance, we can work together for the common good. In my own life, only when I was able to embrace being a wealthy woman could I publicly use my voice to protest the elimination of the estate tax. As one who would have inherited an additional 2+ million if the estate tax had been eliminated, my witness holds more credibility than that of a person who has nothing to lose. By being public about my wealth, I am able to use the power of that position to work in partnership with those in our country who are most vulnerable to the massive cuts in services that would result from the loss of tax revenue. Together we can use our joint wisdom and energy to gain the ear and the eye of the powers that be within the system.

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But the journey doesn’t end when we come to terms with ourselves. It is not enough just to accept ourselves. The second step of this journey requires that we open our eyes to the way that the system is structured to benefit some people (like me) and to exclude others. This requires us to “step outside of our own skin” and to listen to the experiences of those who have no power in the system. From a place of deep awareness, we can embody the radical alternative in the midst of everyday life, and lovingly subvert this destructive system.

People like me live so intertwined with the system and the world’s way that it seems “normal.” Those of us whom the system benefits too often fail to notice that it is structurally biased against most members of the society. For example, my experience shows that my family and home are safer due to the diligent work of the police. The experience of many people of color, especially blacks, is that the police are often dangerous. I could use my experience and say that a black person’s fears are ungrounded, but how would I know? Also my family’s experience is that hard work and intelligence result in financial gain. But a poorer person or a person of color may well have equal or greater intelligence and work as hard or harder and still struggle financially, professionally and personally. Once again, I could use my family’s experience and conclude that this person wasn’t as intelligent or didn’t work as hard. But in reality, how would I know?

I am just beginning to grasp the truth that the system in America and in too much of the world is biased towards people like me. I never noticed any “Whites Only” signs when I was growing up in the 1950’s and 1960’s in Texas, not because they weren’t there but because I didn’t have to notice them. I never noticed that the pre-1969 segregated white schools were better quality schools than the black schools (and I have no idea if Hispanic children came to the “white” or the “black” schools). I didn’t have to notice. I didn’t notice if any of the store clerks or court workers or physicians were prejudiced because it didn’t affect me. I was raised to assume that anyone who was honest, caring, hard working and intelligent could make it anywhere in this world.

Jesus, of course, knew about this dynamic. Jesus had a profound knowing that the people who could most easily see the reality of the world’s system of

racism, sexism, violence and obsession with power were the people who were outcasts in the society. Jesus knew that people who were poor, leprous, or otherwise rejected by the system would understand that the world's system was one of domination. He knew that they would be the ones free enough to see that the Gospel alternative that he brought was a radical alternative to the status quo.

People like myself don't have to see the depth of truth about our culture and our world since, on the whole, doors and opportunities have been open to us (that isn't the whole story, but I'll come back to that). However, that does not mean that Jesus intended to leave me permanently on the outside. Jesus merely knew that I, and people like me, would have a harder time seeing that his radical new way was good news.

Richard Rohr suggests that Jesus came, not to release the oppressed from their captivity, but the oppressors from theirs – this includes those of us who are unintentional oppressors by virtue of the system. If we become free, everyone is free.

If this is true, then it means that people who are structurally at the top of the world are, in reality, captives of the system. We have never noticed how profoundly we are addicted to the perks of the system. The irony is that those of us who are structurally on top are often the most fearful. I expect that the world will work for me in a fair way and I am too often furious if it doesn't work out that way. I expect that I have a right to whatever I can buy. The more possessions I have the more concerned I become about keeping them working and protecting them from harm or theft. The wild actions of the stock market are of more concern now that my investment in this market is larger than in the past. I feel guilty if I don't buy a car that is the safest in crash-tests. My teenage daughter told me I didn't care about her safety if I didn't get her a cell phone. Increased air traffic screening is aimed to keep frequent fliers like myself safe. I was told to teach my children not to talk to strangers. As a group we, who are on top, are terrified and obsessed with our own security.

Living in this crazy, addicted system while trying to pretend that all is well, takes a terrible toll on our mental and spiritual health. Many of my friends are on anti-depressants. Stress related diseases and gen-

eral malaise are widespread. In other words, this society isn't working even for those of us who have the power (just as sexism isn't working for men as well as women).

We desperately hope that we can merely tweak the system, be personally generous or work diligently to solve the world's problems and thus return to "normal life." Jesus knew that these approaches would never work for the good of everyone and the good of the earth. Jesus knew that the people who are structurally at the top of the society would be the most threatened by the radical discipleship he embodied. He knew that we would tend to see his alternative as more loss than gain.

Tragically we are often too entrenched in the system to see that we are prisoners to consumption, to financial security, to the perks of our status as white, American, wealthy. We fear that we will lose our freedom (which is defined by the system as getting what we want and being safe from harm). We are blind to the fact that following Jesus leads to a much more profound freedom from this unseen but powerful prison. We fear the cost of discipleship and don't trust that the alternative will be as life-giving as Jesus promised. And too often we lack the imagination to see the fruits of stepping out of the culture's way and into the Kingdom of God.

My perspective is changing. I now realize how much energy it has taken to buy, maintain and protect so many possessions. And owning this much stuff, while still wanting more, is beginning to feel like a burden rather than freedom.

A trip of perspective to Haiti opened my eyes to the reality of life for most of the world. I was forced to come face to face the web of connections between the poverty of people at home and abroad and my lifestyle and the actions of my country. When I first woke up to this global reality, it was painful and disorienting. The world I had known – the one dominated by my own independence and focus on what was best for me, my family and my country – became hollow. My separation from others who were different than me now felt isolating rather than safe.

This opening to the reality of the world initially felt like death, but actually initiates a process of profound

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transformation. Kathleen Dowling Sing speaks of this eye-opening gift as grace. "Grace is the end of illusion, the realization of a far more expansive and complete sense of being, the peace that quite literally passeth understanding. ...Grace is the experience of finally, gratefully, relaxing the contraction of fearful separation and opening to Spirit as our own radiant splendor: knowing it, feeling it, entering it, as it enters us." *

I believe that when we wake up from our sleep in this previously unseen prison we will be delighted to find that the loss we had so feared is actually the birth pangs of good news for everyone. By losing what we thought was essential, we gain that which is life-giving within a global community. Grounded in love and acceptance of the messiness of who we are and awake to the reality of the world's systems, we are ready to embrace this life-long journey into radical discipleship following the heart of Jesus. And it is gift.



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*Dowling Singh, Kathleen; *The Grace in Dying: A Message of Hope, Comfort, and Spiritual Transformation*; Harper San Francisco, New York, NY; 1998 page 110

Nancy Thurston is a close friend of Harvest Time. Her journey with wealth has included participating in and leading workshops with The Ministry of Money and Journey Into Freedom and, more recently, becoming a member of the Beloved Community, a community birthed through Harvest Time. She has also participated in Be Present, Inc.'s 18 month training on Gender, Power, and Class. A resident of Portland, Oregon, Nancy describes her current call this way:

"I have been given a glimpse of the freedom and joy that comes from stepping into the Commonwealth of God by following Jesus. Experiences of community, letting go, forgiveness, and living as a member of the global family have been life-giving beyond anything I could have imagined. But the cost of doing so involves facing the many ways that I am addicted to the cultural idols (control, independence, protection, to name a few) especially with "my" money. My central call is to explore, illuminate, experiment with and articulate this journey from death to life. The community formed through the work of Harvest Time has

been the primary place of support, love and challenge on this journey. I share this path with my husband of 29 years, Howard. With our two children in college and beyond, we recently leaped into this path with new vigor as empty-nesters."



If you would like to discuss this article further, or have comments or questions, please feel free to contact Rosemary Feerick at 408-264-3039, or by e-mail at rfeerick2002@yahoo.com. Bryan Sirchio can also be contacted at 608-251-0869, or by e-mail at bsirch@sirchio.com.