

Reflections from the Network of Spiritual Progressives Conference of May 2006 by Nancy Lawrence

Seekers Church,
16 July 2006
Nancy Lawrence

Reflections from the Network of Spiritual Progressives Conference of May 2006

We're singing this morning about Abraham/Sarah setting forth on a journey of faith, catching the vision of being founders of a great family of people.

And in our Old Testament reading for today, that vision is well underway as King David unifies Judah and Israel with Jerusalem as the capital, and is now moving to Jerusalem the Ark of the Covenant (that symbol of their religious identity as a people in a covenant relationship with God). Jerusalem with its magnificent temple has not yet happened. The Ark of the Covenant is still on wheels (as it were) and in a tent, symbolic of God's chosen people still "being on a journey of becoming..."

Here at Seekers during this Pentecost season, we've worked on

trying to discern and articulate God's vision for us as a covenant community and how we are to live out of that vision in this next cycle of our life together. Institutions all seem to go through cycles lasting 20-30 years, living out one vision. And then the cycle runs out, and we have to go back through the process of defining who we are and what it is we are to be about NOW in light of current realities. Individuals go through similar cycles.

My own work with inner-journey the past several years now seems to be turning outward as I find myself exploring new things, opening myself to new possibilities that take me beyond my old comfort zone.

The Network of Spiritual Progressives conference that Richard and I attended was one such exploration that looked at the interface of faith and politics. In my upbringing as a Baptist, separation of church and state was important. Even we "moderate" Baptists (as opposed to the fundamentalist ones who took a different path) never got very good at relating to the body politic other than as an individual citizen following one's own conscience. For me, the realm of God and realm of Caesar were separate places that rarely communicated with each other. And I was never particularly interested in politics per se.

Joan Chittister (one of the conference organizers) spoke of the stages of awareness we go through in responding to major societal changes. Typically, we fixate on our own vision of normalcy and miss the incremental changes as they are occurring. At stage 1, we suddenly wake up and see what IS...and wonder "How did this happen?" We keep it to ourselves and start paying attention. At stage 2, we begin to hear other people starting to say the very things we've been thinking.

And at stage 3, like-minded people start getting together to see if they can't fix the problem that the government (or church or whoever) isn't addressing.

In the past few years, it's as if I woke up and began seeing the mess we're in, society alarmingly stratified, lots of people suffering who shouldn't have to be suffering...things I had been unable or unwilling to see earlier. At about the same time, I also began to explore social justice in a seminary course – a topic I had never stopped to define or even consider heretofore, and in the process realized I had also been totally unaware of the enormous spiritual connection with social justice that undergirds and informs that whole concept. Better late than never.

I also found myself wondering if we Seekers are the only ones around who think like we do, who “do church” like we do. After all, we don't go looking for fellow pilgrims of like mind. Sometimes they seek us out and we try to translate our life together in ways they can pick up on and take back to their faith community. So when I hear of other groups of believers who seem to be on a similar journey, it feels like finding the lost coin or meeting up with a kindred spirit out in the wilderness. I grew up in a large denomination whose far-flung mission work stirred my imagination as a youngster and helped me see how God was at work throughout the world as well as in my heart and life. It gave me a larger context for my own faith journey. So it's been a bit strange (amidst all the wonderful-ness of Seekers) for me to see us as a somewhat isolated part of the Body of Christ. [I suspect that for some of you, that lack of denomination feels like good news.]

As much as I feel drawn to large cooperative ventures in

pursuit of a worthy goal (or within a vision of being God's people on mission in the world), I also seem to have an innate sense of caution about those things. Maybe I know that large movements can take on a life of their own. Or perhaps I sense how easily I can get all caught up in a large endeavor and short shrift the hard work of the inner journey. I am convinced that for me, the outer journey **must** emanate from my sense of call, my interior reality of inner journey; otherwise I lose the thread that keeps me in tension between the inner and the outer; that keeps me in touch with my True Self. So I hold the vision of large outer-journey movements in one hand and the quiet inner journey bloom-where-you-are planted vision in the other and seem to want to reconcile those in my own life somehow.

So with that background, this past spring I received a brochure about a national conference on Spiritual Activism here in DC put on by the Network of Spiritual Progressives. ..dealing with something called "spiritual politics" [wasn't sure what that meant; it was almost an oxymoron in my frame of reference] and a vision of transforming the dominant culture in our country. What really caught my attention, however, were the names of the organization's 3 co-founders who would be chairing this conference: Rabbi Michael Lerner, Sister Joan Chittister, and Professor Cornel West. That alone was intriguing. If those 3 people are teaming up for something about spiritual activism, it just might be worth checking out. So I signed up (as did Richard).

The scale and caliber of this conference was most impressive. The co-sponsors were drawn from a broad spectrum of spiritually-oriented progressive organizations with national and international recognition, including the Festival Center.

Equally impressive to me was the list of conference speakers and workshop conveners: Leaders from all the major faith communities, as well as academia, from organizations focused on world peace and justice, poverty, world hunger, healthcare, medicine, education, environment, civil rights, politics etc... They were all highly qualified excellent presenters, many of whom were accustomed to being the major speaker for an entire conference yet here they were, with sometimes only 10 minutes or so to speak, demonstrating radically shrunken egos and a willingness to be just one of many highly-credentialed speakers.

People like Matthew Fox, Tony Campolo, Taylor Branch, Rev Joan Brown Campbell, Arun Gandhi, Obery Hendricks, Penny Nixon, Jim Wallace, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, and 50-75 others. Lest this all seem too heavy, there was also Steve Bhaerman aka Swami Beyondananda (author, humorist, and spiritual/political "uncommontator". There were musicians and dancers (Liz Lerman) and 1200+ participants from across the country. I found the diversity of religious and spiritual traditions rich and nuanced.

Let me say a word about the organization that put on this conference:

In 2002, the Tikkun Community came into being as an interfaith organization, chaired by Michael Lerner, Joan Chittister, and Cornel West. That word "Tikkun" is Hebrew, meaning "for the healing and transformation of the world."

NSP is a project of the Tikkun Community, and is an interfaith

community that also includes people who are “spiritual but not religious.”

Goals:

1. **Change the bottom line in America:** Today, institutions and social practices are judged effective and efficient to the extent they maximize money and power. That’s the “old bottom line.” Under the new bottom line, institutions and social practices would be judged also to the extent that they maximize love, caring, kindness and generosity, and to the extent that they enhance our capacity to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred and respond to the universe with awe and wonder. This approach challenges the extreme individualism and me-first-ism that permeate the global market culture.
2. **Challenge the misuse of religion, God, and spirit by the Religious Right.** A serious commitment to God, religion, and spiritual life manifests not only in inner changes, but also in social activism, world transformation and healing. A true connection to the sacred leads people to align with the struggles for peace, universal disarmament, social justice, and an end to poverty, hunger, homelessness, inadequate education, and inadequate healthcare. It will also mandate a high priority for environmental protection and repair of the damage done to the planet. The NSP provides a voice for many religious and spiritual people who know that the Religious Right does not speak for them.
3. **Challenge the anti-religious and anti-spiritual biases within liberal culture.** We will educate liberals and progressives to distinguish between their legitimate critiques of religious hypocrisy, racism, and homophobia and their illegitimate generalizations about all religious and spiritual beliefs. We will also challenge

the elitist notion that secular people are intellectually on a higher plane than people who participate in a religious or spiritual community. Finally, we will help social change activists become more effective by becoming conscious of and unafraid to affirm the spiritual yearnings that underlie their activism.

NSP sees itself as an alternative to the religious Right and a new direction for the Left.

It identifies its primary work as that of changing the dominant discourse in American society, mainly as a consciousness-raising movement. They know that their message is likely to be at odds with the dominant assumptions of every existing political party. Their goal is still to bring their ideas into every corner of the society.

At NSP's first national conference in 2005 in California, the network began to talk about its purpose and how to achieve that. Based on those conversations a "*Spiritual Covenant with America*" was developed into a proposed platform in Rabbi Lerner's book *The Left Hand of God*. Then, the purpose of the national conference here this past May was to launch a prophetic spiritual politics agenda to the media and to Capitol Hill, and also to train organizers who would take the agenda back into their communities across the country. [That's what Ruth Alice is doing as she organizes a local NSP chapter in her part of Maryland.] Then, gathering all the accumulated input from local chapters etc. "*The Spiritual Covenant with America*" would get finalized and adopted at the next national conference scheduled for 2008... as NSP's Platform with which they'd approach American political discourse: that will be an election year, after all.

But Richard and I didn't know any of that as we stepped into this conference, curious about what it would be like.

The opening hour of spiritual practices set the tone for the whole conference as, one by one, representatives of all the major faith communities shared prayers, songs or other spiritual practices from their traditions in an atmosphere of deep mutual respect. You could feel the strong sense of spiritual unity as together we celebrated being part of God's creation. It was a very moving experience drinking from that deep spiritual well where all the world's religions come together in recognition of our common humanity as embodiments of the Sacred.

So much of what was said at this conference resonated with our own aspirations and spiritual practices as Seekers. I felt at times as if you were all there in spirit. Much was said about life lived out of fear versus life lived out of love, and the role of each in our world today./p>

There was strong emphasis on getting to know each other, even if there were 1200 of us. After each presentation, there would be a pause of 3-5 minutes for talking with someone seated near you (preferably a stranger) about what you had just heard.

The organizers did a good job of addressing so many disparate aspects of our culture that indeed do need a new Bottom Line. I loved the integration of economics, religion, medicine, politics, sociology (family, sexuality, aging, racism, etc.),...weaving them all into a new vision, which, by the way, sounded a lot like our class discussions here at our SCL class on "Heaven" ...envisioning what it might look like if "Thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven" actually happened in

the here and now.

They emphasized strengthening your own faith practices; they spoke often of the significance of the inner journey ... very familiar, indeed. ...as was also the feature of local chapters having small spiritual groups that sound a lot like our mission groups.

What did I Not Like About This Conference?

Its schedule went from 8am to 10pm without any real breaks. Way too much to take in all at once. But that was balanced by a sense of people being very present to the moment, not rushed in the presentations or workshops.

One negative, of course, was my innate wariness about this movement's political goals: was our spirituality being manipulated to serve a political end? Were they in some ways trying to usurp the role of my faith community? Or is all this still just too new for me to sort it out more comfortably? And while I really did appreciate and take advantage of the chance to work on the interplay between faith and politics, I recognized that becoming an alternative to the political/religious Right did not appeal to me. Their larger societal goals were somehow easier for me to relate to. I'm still processing these contradictions within myself and will be for some time.

One of the things I value most was the Network's overall goal

of changing the dominant culture for the healing of the world. That seemed deeply compelling and universal in its appeal to all people of faith. I carried away from the conference a lot of valuable information and rich inspiration as well as a greater awareness of the world around me and the spiritual resources available to us in the co-creative work of healing and transforming the earth.

I loved Joan Chittister's wry observation in response to the wishful desire on the part of some for a miracle from God to "fix" the mess we're in when she said: "It would indeed be a miracle if the religious people would just be religious!"

I'll always remember Marie Dennis (Pax Christi) and her story of 9/11 now 5 years later as a chance to look at our broken wounded places and envision possibilities for a radical shift to shalom...to God's vision...to God's work in the midst of that brokenness. She shared what, for her, was almost an after-thought a few days after 9/11 of planting in a NYC park near Ground Zero some seeds she had received from a Salvadoran farmer's first harvest as a way for her to honor the loss of her loved one, and then to discover some months later as she happened to pass that way a huge lone stalk of corn standing as an audacious sign of hope.

In so many ways, this conference felt like an enormous sign of hope. It fed my need to connect with other people of faith for the healing of the world. It challenged me to keep attending to the task of finding my place of service, my call, yet still stay connected to the inner journey where being becomes the bedrock for the outward journey of doing.

In this Pentecost season, may we be especially open to the

nudgings of God's spirit in our individual lives as well as in our collective life as Seekers Church.

Jonathan Granoff (another conference speaker) reminded us of what we already know but need to hear again and again:

"We have to learn to walk a little bit more softly on this earth. It doesn't belong to us. We are privileged to be here for a while and then we have to move on. **And what we do matters, because we have been placed here as the witnesses of the Divine. ...**

May God make us sanctuaries of peace inspired by love, guided by compassion; may we be those who remember and those who demonstrate that remembrance in our daily lives; as simple as that, and God will guide us." Amen.