

The Love That Does Justice

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Thank you. I am delighted to be present at this important conference.

The essence of what I have to say this evening amounts to a bold – some might say extravagant or even dangerous – claim: that the future of our world depends on how successful we are in developing and applying a new social science of love. By this I mean a set of theories, models, methods and empirical cases that show how politics, economics, organizational development, social and international relations can be transformed through a radically-different form of rationality, a rationality of “love into action”, so to speak, applied in and through the systems that are essential to the functioning of all successful societies.

Social science is, or should be, a rigorous set of disciplines, and when applied to the study of love, this necessary degree of rigor casts doubt, I think, on the working hypothesis of this session - that in and of themselves, faith-based organizations offer a convincing solution to the dilemmas of love into action. More promising, in my view, is Martin Luther King’s philosophy of the “love that does justice”, signifying the deliberate cultivation of mutually-reinforcing cycles of personal and systemic change. King himself, of course, was deeply-inspired by his faith, but his philosophy was never limited to faith-based communities or faith-based action. Some faith-based organizations exemplify this philosophy in the very different context of today, but many, I think, do not, and as I hope to explain tonight, now is the time to extend King’s approach to all institutions right across the board.

Before I explain why I think this is so, let me provide two pieces of background information on the evolution of my own interests in the social science of love. First, I have spent the last 20 years as a funder of social change for charities like Oxfam and Save the Children, and now at the Ford Foundation, constantly looking for and evaluating individuals and organizations that work for peace and social justice. This experience has convinced me that there is a missing link in many of these efforts that holds back their effectiveness and achievements, and this missing link is love, or more precisely the failure to use love as the basis for the functioning of the organization and its work. The result is often burnout, over-competition, an inability or unwillingness to learn lessons or collaborate with others, and a failure to build the necessary alliances that could lead to sustained change on a significant scale.

Secondly, I was trained as a social scientist in the United Kingdom, and have spent a lifetime studying the conditions under which communities succeed or fail in realizing their visions of the good society. These explorations led me to focus on civil society as a critical element in such efforts, defined both as associational life and the public sphere,

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but also to a nagging sense of disappointment about the achievements of citizens groups and movements in the cold light of day. Although many see civil society as the natural home of virtue, even love, we have to remind ourselves that it is simply an arena – even a battlefield – for competing interests, the good, the bad and the ugly. In any case, major social transformations have never been achieved by civic groups acting alone; state and market action is also vital. Even at their best, such groups, including faith-based groups, may be islands of love in an ocean of selfishness and violence. So the core task, it seems to me, is not to fixate on civil society as a solution to social problems but to ask how institutions across society can be transformed by altering – through love – their individual behaviors and interactions with each-other.

These experiences led me to formulate a simple conceptual framework to describe what I and my co-writer Gita Sen have called “integrated social change.” From the perspective of change, all social systems rest on three bases: a set of principles that form an axiomatic basis of ethics and values; a set of processes – the functioning mechanisms and institutions that undergird the system; and the subjective states that constitute our inner being – our personal feelings and intuitions in the deepest sense.

When we explore any episode of change, we can identify how these three dimensions work together to promote a particular set of outcomes. For example, the evolution of capitalism was built on the axiomatic basis that individual self-interest leads, by and large, to collective welfare. Its institutional structures are rooted in private property relations and market-based incentives. And the subjective state of being most compatible with capitalism is a commitment to individual advancement and competitive interaction.

However, the linkages that develop between these three bases of change are not immutable – they can be altered to produce a different set of outcomes, for example, by rebelling against the subjective state that is promoted by a particular set of institutions, or experimenting with new institutions that operate from a different subjective or axiomatic base. This is why love, as the most powerful subjective state we know of, can have such a transformative effect when injected like a virus into economic, political and social institutions. These institutions are not simply floating somewhere out there in space, they constitute and are constituted by each of us as conscious human beings, or active citizens to use a phrase currently much in vogue. So when we talk of engaging with these systems and structures, we are really talking about engaging with ourselves and with each-other.

In terms of faith-based organizations, think of these relationships as a triangle that links theology or teachings, ethics and moral values, and personal or metaphysical experience, all resting on a base of altruism or unlimited love. These personal experiences, usually founded on some sort of contemplative practice, can assist people, in Robert Gass’s words, to “create together a living experience of a new paradigm of social justice out of which work can then flow”, since to love one another we must first come to know and love our Selves – our true selves that is, not the mask or makeup we usually wear for public display. As this process deepens, the institutions generated in this new paradigm can facilitate further personal transformation by creating more welcoming environments for compassion and contemplation, no longer reserved for church on Sunday (if you’ll

forgive a particularistic example) but carried out as a regular component of work and daily life. These mutually-reinforcing cycles of change exemplify “the love that does justice”, in Martin Luther King’s words. And wherever such cycles are present (inside or outside the faith-based community) success is more likely to be sustained.

In practice however, one or other of these dimensions is usually weak or missing. For example, theology or ethics may not be supported by the personal transformations required to make them real, while economic and political institutions may not allow people to express the values and motivations that they do hold in their hearts – a characteristic of all modern industrial societies, some might say. Where then do we find such cycles of change, and how can we begin them where they are missing?

Many would argue, as in this panel, that faith-based organizations are the logical place to start, but at the risk of being lovingly-provocative, faith is usually particularistic, attached to defined sub-sectors of humankind and agendas that are privileged, whereas love and loving kindness are universal, unconditional, attached only, as the definition offered by our conference organizers tells us, to the equal and general welfare of the whole. “The essence of love,” they say, “is to affectively affirm as well as unselfishly delight in the well being of others, and to engage in acts of care and service on their behalf, without exception, in an enduring and constant way.”

How do faith-based organizations measure up to this ideal? The reality of faith-based organizations (at least the ones I know) is one of incredible diversity, to the point where one has to question whether this is a meaningful category at all. The radical social activism of the Industrial Areas Foundation seems very distant from Pat Robertson’s “Operation Blessing”, for example. Faith-based organizations, just like any set of human institutions, display a huge range of values and dispositions, and concrete levels of success, from the sublime to the ridiculously incompetent. Research also suggests that the factors that mark out successful organizations often cut across the lines of public, private and civic sectors; they are not the properties of one sector alone (high levels of accountability, for example, good listening skills, a clear vision, and a willingness to reach out and make connections with others). Evidence from a study undertaken by the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania, directed by two of my fellow panelists (Byron Johnson and John DiIulio), concludes that, even after reviewing 97 rigorous studies of faith-based initiatives, we “do not know whether America’s religious armies of compassion necessarily out-perform their secular counterparts.”

Secularists are right, I think, to be suspicious of these claims, especially particularistic faith-based interpretations of public policy that carry with them more than a whiff of fundamentalism. Trent Lott, for example, said recently that “we have the opportunity to establish a biblically-based foreign policy”, but which parts of biblical teaching does he mean, whose interpretation, and what about the views of US citizens – or those overseas who suffer or benefit from the consequences of US foreign policy – who are inspired by teachings other than the Bible? Perhaps he had in mind the Reverend C. Welton Gaddy, who was accused last month of refusing water to US troops in Iraq unless they agreed to

be baptized. Is this faith-based public policy, or a personal view that co-opts a particular interpretation of faith-based teachings for political ends? There is nothing loving about the prejudice that one finds in some faith communities – the consistent attacks on women’s rights, the homophobia, the narrow-mindedness and reluctance to enter into community-wide activities and concerns rather than intra-congregational commitments, and the substitution of individual acts of charity or service for a full and complete understanding of the structural factors that lead to oppression. “Pillar of the community, soccer coach, wife beater” as a sign on the New York subway reads. Social conservatism is rarely more dangerous than when it cloaks itself in religious garb that cannot adequately be challenged by rationalist arguments for social justice because it assumes an other-worldly authority. Think of the unholy alliances that have formed throughout history between religious groups and authoritarian states – the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in recent times, for example, or the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. This is why so many people fear the penetration of the public sphere by religion.

If faith-based organizations vary so much in their characteristics and performance, it is clear that faith alone cannot be the deciding factor in determining these patterns. So what is it that really makes the difference? I think it is the presence or absence of the “love that does justice.” Because of its un-conditionality and its rigor, this kind of love provides an answer to these secular concerns, recognizing as it does the importance of our inner experiences and the values-based motivations they bring to public policy, but separating them from the limitations of religion, or even spirituality. This is a love that respects the necessary self-empowerment of others, eschewing paternalism and romanticism for relationships of truth and authenticity, even where they move through phases of conflict and disagreement, as all do. Elsewhere I have called this kind of love “critical friendship”, meaning relationships that encourage us to live up to our social obligations as well our individual moral values, connect our interior life worlds to public spaces, encourage collective judgments and create open networks of self-reflective and critical communication – all the things that are necessary for a healthy democracy and democratic public policy making.

Critical friendship signifies a willingness to care for the common good and address the structural barriers that stand in its way. But the moving force in this process must be love, since without it, we may never make the necessary commitments on an enduring basis, or if we do then we are likely to carry with us the “thieves of the heart” - the greed, ego, anger, fear and insecurities that that will likely pollute or erode the success of our efforts to be a positive force for change in the world. This why the transformation of the Self is so vital. Great inner strength is required to confront the structures of power in the world unselfishly, without demonizing one’s enemies, alienating potential allies, or holding on too tightly to a particular vision of ends and means that can eventually become a prison. In the “love that does justice”, remember, personal and structural change are self-reinforcing. Only by operating from the space where we are joined together in some deep sense are we likely to find true common ground in facing up to the collective problems that confront us.

Confronting common problems in this way is, I think, the essence of the “love that does justice.” As the song says, “don’t hide your love away” by restricting it to your familiars or privatizing it to the sphere of family, friends and faith. Take it out into the world wherever you go, at work, through the associations you belong to, in politics and government, education and social service delivery, foreign policy and international development. Sounds attractive, no? But can public policies motivated by love really “deliver the goods” in social, economic and political terms? Can they generate enough jobs and an economic surplus large enough to satisfy human needs at lower cost to producers and consumers in globally-integrated markets, to the environment, and to the underlying values that hold societies together? Can they facilitate political decision-making that is fair and effective in mediating competing claims and interests without falling prey to the “dictatorship of the majority” or the perils of special interest politics? Can they address problems of discrimination and exclusion in the social realm, which often require enforcement and coercion by state authorities, not just voluntary action? And can they resolve global conflicts and differences peacefully, but more effectively than at present, even in the most difficult of circumstances, like the task of unseating tyrants such as Saddam Hussein? Or are these thoughts simply the deluded romance of an armchair radical?

The simple answer is: we don’t know, and we won’t know until we try to make these connections on a much larger and more systematic basis. There are, however, examples to learn from, though one shouldn’t expect love to generate ready-made answers to deep rooted and intractable problems of economic and social life. Where they emerge, such answers are more likely to take shape as experiments, evolving organically in different ways in different contexts, and unlikely to be codified according to the conventional logics of Left or Right, Democrat or Republican. Love provides a different set of motivations from which alternatives can grow, not a new grand plan to be imposed from above.

For example, in the field of organizational development we are already blessed with an emerging community of “spiritual activists” who have recognized that social change organizations can achieve significant improvements in performance when they integrate contemplative practices into their work and deliberately cultivate structures and forms of leadership informed by a non-denominational, spiritual awareness. Their experience brings to mind Robert Frost’s poetic phrase “the hidden offices of love”, signifying the application of loving kindness to small problems inside teams and organizations on a day-to-day basis that eventually produces a sea change in the way the organization works, translated into coalition-building across the lines of difference that can eventually win broad-based gains in service-delivery and public policy. The Ford Foundation is supporting many in this growing movement, including Kim Bobo of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, Simon Greer of Jobs with Justice in New York, Claudia Horowitz of Stone Circles in North Carolina, the Rockwood Leadership Program in California, and Mirabai Bush and her team at the Center for Contemplative Mind and Society in Massachusetts. For those of you who want to learn more about this burgeoning movement, I recommend you check out the Center’s website at www.contemplativemind.org. As Simon has said of his experience, “as a frontline

organizer, I and many others were fighting out of hate for the other side, not out of love for where we could go as a community. I was proud because we were winning, but it wasn't sustainable. We needed to work from what we were in favor of, rather than what we were against."

In politics and economics such examples are more difficult to find, and given recent scandals in both arenas it may seem risible to argue for the "loving corporation" or the "loving politician or political party." However, what one might call "low-level attempts" to integrate love into the workings of the marketplace are already common - in the form of respect for labor standards, better working conditions and the environment, for example, and greater corporate social responsibility. In politics, new forms of dialogic or participatory democracy are taking hold at the local level which give those on the margins more of a voice in decision-making and render governance less prone to bias from special interests. If these experiments fall short of "unlimited love", then at least they move us closer to a politics and economics of equality and respect, qualities that may lead to deeper changes as they continue to unravel over time.

In international relations, which for obvious reasons is an especially important field at the present time, it is probably hardest of all, given the dead hand of foreign policy realism and the destructive urges that still linger within us from the Cold War and its descendants. But the connections are undoubtedly there if we look for them. As Chris Hedges has written in his book "War is a Force that Gives Us meaning", "love is the most potent enemy of war" because the death of one who loves and is loved (as opposed to someone considered a colleague or a comrade) is simply insupportable, however much it is rationalized away as a necessary sacrifice. In my book "Future Positive" I try to show how the principles of "critical friendship" could be used to construct a viable model of relations between countries who agree to cooperate with each other in resolving global problems as equal partners, though differentially-endowed and situated. In this sense, international relations could be seen as a set of loving but forceful encounters between equals who journey together towards the land of the true and the beautiful.

In conclusion, marrying a rich inner life dedicated to the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion with the practice of new forms of politics, economics and public policy is, I believe, the key to social transformation. We are, to be sure, only at the beginning of our journey of love into action, a journey that will take many generations to reach the more humane world that lies in waiting at its destination. The power of this conference, it seems to me, is that it provides a safe space in which to legitimize a conversation about matters that are profoundly sensitive, complicated and difficult, or that are often simply dismissed by their critics as wacky, new age, reactionary or juvenile. On the contrary: it is my conviction that we are placed on the earth to love and be loved, not as an exercise in narcissism but as the wellspring of motivations that enable us to co-create a different and better world. This is our collective responsibility for the future.

Thank you.