

Harrisonburg Unitarian Universalist Church, 16 Nov 08

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I appreciate all of our UU Principles. For many years now I've been particularly concerned with economic justice. I see our 2nd Principle – “We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” As I've mentioned before, I think one must have economic justice as well as legal justice in order for society to function well.

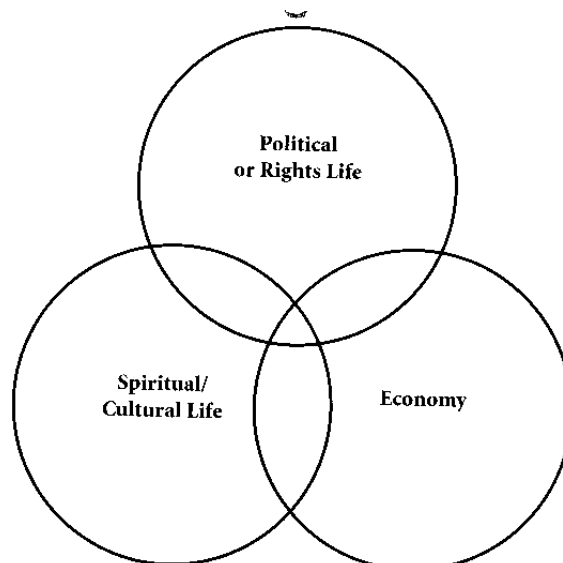
A question is, “how do we have a just society in regard to economics?” I think that our current economic challenges provide us an opportunity to reflect on that.

I've recently found helpful some of the work done by Rudolf Steiner and people who have drawn on his insights. I'd like to share some of that thinking and see if it might be helpful to you.

Rudolf Steiner was a 20th century philosopher, scientist, and innovator. Steiner's work gave rise to several movements – the Waldorf Schools is one, Biodynamic Farming/Gardening is another.

Shortly after World War I Steiner pointed out the need to look again at how society is structured. Germany was in a time of crisis. The economy was in a shambles, infrastructure was poor, people were disheartened.

Steiner delineated what came to be known as the Threefold Nature or Threefold Order of Society. In simplified form these are: Political/Rights life; spiritual/cultural life; and Economy. Steiner emphasized that these three functions of social life need to be separate, though they will obviously overlap at some points. I'd like to share some thoughts about each of these and see what implications for us there might be. Perhaps this diagram will be helpful – showing that each sector is separate, and, at times there is overlap.



There is the **political or rights sector**. This is what we normally see as the role of government. The purpose of this is the protection of human rights. Here laws which keep us safe are created and enforced. It is agreed that, in the western hemisphere, we will all drive on the right hand side of the road and that alcohol will not be sold within 100 yards of any elementary or secondary educational institution. Those laws or regulations reflect what we in the community see as right, just, and fair; what is acceptable social behavior.

Steiner envisioned some strict limits to this political or rights sector. The role of the government is simply to ensure that **true equality** of each citizen prevails. The hallmark of rights/political life is **democracy**. All people are seen and treated as equal.

While we in the USA feel like we have a democracy, we also have governmental decision making processes which are influenced, dominated even, by special interest groups and lobbying efforts.

In addition the government is involved in areas not related to rights, such as the regulation of agriculture.

According to the 3 fold view the proper role of those in the rights sector would be that of ensuring public safety, protecting the environment, and ensuring the individual rights of all people in society.

Then there is the economic sector. This is the area of production and distribution of goods.

In our complex time, it might be helpful to take a simple example. – Once upon a time there was a village in which there were 10 woodcutters. Each day the woodcutters would go out and cut wood. To keep the math simple, let's say that they cut 10 units of wood apiece. After they cut their 10 units they would bring the wood to the village to sell. Each individual was both a cutter and a sales person. Then, one day, one of the woodcutters has the idea that if each of the woodcutters didn't need to bring the wood into the village to "sell," the remaining woodcutters could cut more wood. So, our woodcutter makes a deal with the other nine woodcutters. He will collect all their wood, take it to the village and sell it. In exchange they will have time to cut additional wood. In exchange he will take part of their wood for his portion. So, now the 9 woodcutters have additional time and find that they can, among them, cut 13 units of wood apiece. That makes a total of 117 units. The entrepreneur, our "Carter" hauls all the wood to the village and sells it. He keeps 12 units of wood – two more than he was able to cut, and the remaining nine woodcutters have an additional $\frac{1}{2}$ unit each. Let's not worry about the percentages just now. It might have been that the nine woodcutters had an additional 1 or 2 full units to sell. I'm trying to keep it simple. Everyone is better off! The

villagers have their wood needs met, the woodcutters have extra income, and the Carter is doing well himself. He is being rewarded for his creativity (something which he had sharpened by his cultural training, no doubt!) This an example of **division of labor** and has enabled an increase in income among all involved!

Gradually the Carter accumulates what we would call “excess capital.” Then one day a young fellow comes to him, perhaps the child of one of the nine wood cutters. This young fellow has an idea for a tool which will make the cutting of wood easier. What he needs is capital – some money to have time away from his usual work, engage the blacksmith, set up a tool shop and develop this new tool. Because the Carter has some additional capital, he can loan this young person the money to get started. The young fellow invents the cross cut saw. That invention enables the nine woodcutters to cut even more wood than before. Now they can sell some of their wood to other villages, or, on some days, they can work fewer hours, or take a day off occasionally. This is an example of **technology** making work easier and there is an increase in income, and/or an increase in additional time for cultural activities.

So far, so good. The “excess capital” which the Carter accumulated through the division of labor and technology has been put to good and creative use. (We are not dealing with the challenges of deforestation at this point!) The challenge comes when too much capital is accumulated by too few people. Steiner felt that capital should be circulated. History indicates that when excess capital is accumulated it becomes stagnant; there come to be power and class struggles with the accompanying unhappy times.

Let’s come back to that kind of thinking in a bit.

As I think of the economic realm, I recall something from Henry David Thoreau – something which jumped out at me when I first read it. Thoreau wrote, “it ought to be the business of shoe manufacturers to see that people have good shoes, instead the company exists to make money for its owners.” The difference seems so simple and obvious – and, it is far removed from current capitalism as we practice it. Rudolf Steiner envisioned the economic sector as that which takes resources from the earth – wood, minerals, the earth itself – and modifies those resources into something people need and want. His vision for the economic sector was in line with that of Thoreau. Steiner felt that a healthy economy would be a conscious collaboration of producers, distributors, and consumers, who would work together in **associations**. The consumers in the association would share with the producers how much wood, how many shoes were needed, the producers would responsibly take from nature the resources they needed – the leather, canvas, rubber, metal, etc. and create the shoes. The distributors – if needed – would be sure that the shoes were delivered. While that sounds rather idealistic, what would be the problem? How is our current system such a vast improvement?!!

The economic sector indicates human activity which contributes to the production, distribution and consumption of what we need due to the fact that we have a physical body. The economic sector is derived from the substances and forces of the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms. It is in the economic sector that, through the use of the division of labor and the use of technology and labor saving devices, that some money, and some excess capital, is created – as in the case of our woodcutters and Carter. We use money to facilitate these processes, but money is not itself a component of the productive process. After all, you cannot eat or wear dollar bills. (You could burn them for fuel, I suppose, but that is not a usual practice.) Another reality is that in the economic sphere no one person can provide for himself or herself all that they need. Here we are dependent on working together, thus there is the need of mutuality, of cooperation. This is why Steiner felt that associations of producers, distributors, and consumers was particularly relevant in the economic sector.

We may need to say more about the economic sector, but let's look at the third sector, that of the **cultural/spiritual life**. This is the realm of education, religious practices, medicine, science, research, music, and the arts - those things which provide for the needs of the inner soul life. This sphere comprises all those things which lead one on a search for knowledge, creativity, and understanding; things which assist in developing one's particular capacities and development.

It is in the cultural/spiritual sphere that each person's **freedom** is to be respected. In the economic sphere there is to be cooperation. In the rights sphere there is equality.

The cultural/spiritual sphere is also the realm of sustainable agriculture. Why? Because truly sustainable agriculture is intimately involved with nature, embraces scientific research, artistic creativity, and is a spiritual practice.

Once again let me emphasize Steiner's own emphasis that these three realms be kept separate. For example, Libertarians rightly emphasize the freedom we are to have in the cultural/spiritual realm, but then they seek to impose that freedom onto the political/rights sphere – and that's where they get into trouble.

There are some implications to the Threefold Order. When we think of people who work primarily in the cultural/spiritual sector, we could ask where the money they need comes from. A distinction from Steiner's way of thinking is that this money is a gift. Someone who teaches school isn't taking resources from nature and making a product for sale, and thus isn't in the economic realm. So, it is helpful to realize that what society is doing is taking some of the excess capital produced in the economic realm and giving that to those in the cultural realm so that they are free to fulfill their calling. In the same way some of the

excess capital is taken from the economic realm and given to those in the rights sphere – the police, fire and rescue personnel, and government officials whose task it is to keep us safe and protect the rights of all of us. The difference this makes is that society realizes that the teacher isn't being **paid** for what he or she is doing; the teacher is being **given** the resources needed to fulfill their calling, their destiny- which is to teach. Out of the teaching will come creativity and future developments of society. The students now being taught will go on to become carpenters, doctors, tailors, and farmers, the inventors of the cross cut saw. Some of them will develop new ways of doing things so that work will be done more efficiently. Others will grow the food and make the shoes and tables which we need. Others will help us with our own soul life.

When we start to talk about “gift” rather than “salary,” some surprising things happen! For one thing, some teachers will need to be “gifted” more resources than other teachers need. Michael Spence, to whom I'm much indebted for this way of thinking, talked of the college in England where he worked and shared that, for many years, teachers did not receive the same amount of financial resources because their needs were different. The teacher of foreign languages needed to sometimes travel to those countries in which the language was spoken. The single teacher who was the parent of children needed to receive more than the teacher whose spouse had an income and whose children were grown. In this particular college community the amount of income faculty and staff received was based on life circumstances. Everyone saw what they received as a gift. There were occasions when circumstances changed. A teacher's spouse or child became seriously ill – that teacher could request additional resources. In another situation a teacher became aware that her children were now independent, she did not require as many of the school's resources as she did previously.

Now, I know that sounds idealistic and socialistic, and, doesn't it make sense? Is the way we in the USA are currently practicing capitalism based on overconsumption making any more sense?!! Steiner believed in reincarnation and felt that it may take humanity many more incarnations over a few millennia to get to this perspective, and, isn't it an interesting twist to the way we look at things?!

Seeing the money which teachers and firefighters receive as “gift” is helpful to me. The way those “gifts” currently happen is through taxes – a kind of “enforced gift”! Steiner would say that it would be better for those in the economic associations to willingly set aside some of the excess capital produced to share as gifts to those in the cultural/spiritual and rights spheres. Thinking like this lessens any resentment we might have about the movement of capital from the economic sphere to the cultural/spiritual sphere.

Ideally what would happen in our village with the woodcutters, Carter, and Sawyer, would be that the Carter, the entrepreneur with the excess capital, would continue to make that capital

available for additional innovations and provide some for the cultural and rights realm. The various form of economic distribution – feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism – have all sought ways to distribute excess capital. Obviously each of those forms has been sabotaged and distorted along the way. Steiner’s approach is one which could be a viable alternative, though it may take a few more millennia to take effect!

It is also important to note that Steiner is looking at the economic sector from the perspective of the entire community. He would say it is important that the association and community consider what is best for the whole group, not just one individual or family.

In some ways this kind of voluntary redistribution was the way education happened 100 years ago. In many communities people saw the need for a school teacher. They would pool their money, buy a building, and hire a schoolmarm to move to the community. That’s the way my grandfather met my grandmother – the schoolmarm who boarded with the Crumleys and was swept off her feet by young James Robert, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Crumley who was still at home at the time!

It seems obvious to me that in our current situation the economics sector has had too much influence. The balance we need is in the cultural/spiritual sphere. It is in this sector that many people need to be strengthened. Here we need to spend more of our time and energy. Our society has the ability to produce the goods and services we need for living reasonably well. We could do that without any one person or group spending an excessive amount of time working in the economic sector. The problem is, our society isn’t structured that way.

As a summary of the threefold order:

In rights life there is to be equality

In cultural/spiritual life there is to be freedom

In economic life there is to be cooperation

Now the question for us becomes, “how might we use some of Steiner’s insights on a local level to create a local, living economy, one in which resources are equitably shared, physical needs are met, there are opportunities for cultural activities, and the rights of all are protected?”

During the discussion in Harrisonburg some additional thoughts emerged.

When too much capital is accumulated in the economic sphere, it would be the proper work of the rights sector to see that it is moved to the cultural/spiritual sphere. Limits are needed on the capital accumulated.

I am much indebted to Gary Lamb and Michael Spence for thoughts in this sermon.

Gary Lamb wrote, "Agriculture and Its Relation to Government" in Stella Natura, the 2008 Kimberton Hills Biodynamic Calendar

Michael Spence has an unpublished manuscript entitled "Beyond Capitalism" which he graciously shared. He is the author of Freeing the Human Spirit.