

Inequality for All: The Immorality of the Wealth Gap in America

Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation

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Have you seen the film *Elysium*? It was released back in 2013 to mixed reviews. The premise is fairly simple – The film is set in 2154, when the planet has been ravaged by disease, pollution, and overpopulation. The wealthiest now live on a space station called *Elysium*, which can be glimpsed through the murky haze from Earth below.

Max, played by Matt Damon, has grown up watching *Elysium* from his rundown, largely Latino L.A. neighborhood. A reformed car thief now working in a grueling factory job—he's lucky to have it, he's sneeringly informed—Max is trying to keep things together in a society openly rigged against the poor.

If you click on the film's official website, there is a link called “You won't find a better home on earth” which cleverly mimics the kind of glossy housing development website you might find for sanitized gated communities like Disney's surreal Celebration, FL. In 2021, (133 years pre-*Elysium*, the American affluent may not live on a space station, but they are often sequestered in enclaves just as exclusive.

Coincidentally, the same year *Elysium* hit the multiplex, thousands recreated the March Washington as a 50th anniversary tribute to Martin Luther King's dream and as a rallying cry that some things have not progressed nearly enough. King called for a radical change in society and was masterful at connecting racism, moral behavior, and poverty in America. He pioneered “*fusion coalitions*” and *intersectionality* long before these terms became justice buzzwords.

You may recall that as part of King's Campaign for the Poor, he advocated for a minimum wage of \$2. Right – that doesn't even buy a coffee these days. But, adjusted to 2018 numbers, a minimum wage of \$2 an hour would be \$15 an hour. And what is the federal minimum wage - \$7.25 in most states. In Flagstaff, the minimum wage is a relatively lush \$15 per hour and it is still mighty challenging to live securely on that wage (especially with local housing and rental prices skyrocketing to service...you guessed it, an affluent influx.) Where are teachers, firefighters or medical assistants supposed to live?

MLK died during his campaign and sadly, one of Jesus' astute predictions from the Gospel of Mark 14 (which King often quoted) is still agonizingly true: "The poor you will always have with you." In America, those poor have gotten farther and farther from the wealthy in wages, wealth distribution, and power. How did this happen and what can we do to continue marching, marching on for a decent, moral, and economically just society?

I wish I had a definitive answer to that question. I do not, and I ask you to join me in the thinking process on this very complex and disturbing social and moral issue. What I do have are ideas, ponderings, questions, and the leadership of the Rev. William Barber and his Poor People's Campaign which models *intersectionality*, wrapped around a mortal imperative to effect radical change. (learn more at poorpeoplescampaign.org)

Let's go back to 2013 one more time – that summer, Walmart was pressured to pay its employees fairly, and throughout the blogosphere, McDonald's was widely derided for releasing an insulting and clueless budget to help its employees plan financially that only underscored how brutally hard it is to live on a McDonald's minimum wage. Do you remember that fiasco?

Writing in the *New Yorker* magazine, James Surowiecki explains that..."the reason this became a big political issue is not that the jobs had changed; it's that the people doing the jobs had. Historically, low-wage work tended to be done either by the young or by women looking for part-time jobs to supplement family income. Walmart in its early days sought explicitly to hire underemployed married women.

The minimum wage workforce, meanwhile, was dominated by teen-agers. Now, plenty of family breadwinners are stuck in these jobs. It is that change which has driven the demand for higher pay. The situation is the result of a tectonic shift in the American economy and culture. In 1960, the country's biggest employer, General Motors, was also its most profitable company and one of its best-paying. It had high profit margins and real pricing power, even as it was paying its workers union wages.

And it was not alone: firms like Ford, Standard Oil, and Bethlehem Steel employed huge numbers of well-paid workers while earning big profits. There was an understanding of mutual loyalty among workers and companies that has all but vanished. The gig economy has mushroomed in the face of uncertain job security and the pandemic lockdown. Remote work is now the norm. However, today, the country's biggest employers are still retailers and fast-food chains operating on slim profit margins, almost all of which have built their businesses on low pay, low prices, and by keeping unions at bay (insert Amazon's Alabama warehouse here).

If we want to transform these jobs into living wage employment, we'll have to accept higher prices, but we've had decades to get used to cheap stuff. In fact, America feels entitled to it. And what do we do with it. At an increasingly alarming rate, we store it. Did you know that storage facilities are one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy? The statistics are staggering....2.3 billion square feet of storage space!

Some folks are storing stuff they can't part with; others are storing what's left of their lives after evictions and foreclosures. There's even a massively popular reality show in which folks bid on other people's foreclosed (and unforeseen) storage containers hoping to unearth a treasure. It's bizarrely American.

Yet, in this land of plenty, there is plenty of waste. 1 in 6 American children face hunger issues, yet we waste \$165 billion dollars worth of uneaten food. There are thousands of inhabitable or rehab-able empty dwellings in our country, while 554,000 live on the streets. It's a soul sickness in our society and a genuine moral crisis whether we were born on third base, or first.

As the star of the documentary film, Inequality for All, Robert Reich, former Labor Secretary and one of America's foremost economists, spent years pre-pandemic circuit riding across the US spreading the gospel about our increasing wealth gap and its impact on our democracy and our very decency.

His rhetoric rose in pitch during the Trump administration and their openly callous policies, coupled with the biggest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in history. Reich tells us that folks often ask him – “Who does it better?” to which he answers, “We did, from 1947-1977. But now we have the most unequal distribution of wealth in the world, with the 400 richest Americans owning more wealth than the bottom 150 million Americans combined. (shades of *Elysium*).

And the pandemic did not slow that down, The ultrawealthy, Americans with \$30 million and up suffered a brief setback but then rebounded and scores of new billionaires were minted, while foreclosures and unemployment lines swelled.

Yet, according to some fascinating social science experiments, joining the super wealthy will not make you more compassionate or generous – unless you are Bill and Melinda Gates, or Oprah, or Mackenzie Bezos. The rich, in lab settings, are less likely to relate to the suffering of others. There are higher rates of entitled and narcissistic behaviors, and an uptick in beliefs that ethics are relative and that the less fortunate have earned their lack of success. Systemic racism is not on the radar screen, for the most part.

While this level of inequality threatens all of us, the middle class is fueling and expressing a particular rage about the loss of the American dream John

Winthrop spoke of in 1650..the shining city on a hill, the promise of advancement and prosperity to those who work hard and color inside the lines. Yet, even that dream, its emphasis on consuming, may be ripe for reexamination.”

As the Rev. Marilyn Sewall has lamented (and I agree with her):

“We are a nation where freedom has now been interpreted to mean that the strong don’t have to care for the weak. We are a nation that stinks from corruption at the top, a nation which dresses itself in God-language while pandering unashamedly to the rich while ignoring the poor; we are a nation hated and reviled by many other nations and grudgingly tolerated by those who would count us as friends. We are far from that “city upon a hill,” that moral compass for other nations—rather, we have decided to build empire, that a few might flourish at the expense of the many.”

“But a consumerist American dream is not worthy of our lives,” Sewall boldly notes. “The emptiness of that narrative will become apparent, as young people reach out for meaning in a society no longer grounded in communitarian values. Aren’t we seeing that in the astonishing youth who organized the March For Our Lives on March 23, 2018. Did you attend one of those marches – if you did, you were intersecting with non-UUs around an issue that impacts us all. That is the goal – intersecting for dignity, for justice.

“A decent society feels the reverberations of income inequality as a spiritual and personal wound, as those affected by poverty suffer with feelings of powerlessness, loss of sense of self, loss of sense of historical participation, less likely to vote, feel their voice won’t matter, and low self-esteem. More than ever, people need leadership, courage, energy and a moral imperative to get them moving.”

That moral imperative is there, given that the major world religions already include a spiritual practice of helping the needy – Tdekkah in Judaism, Dana in Buddhism, Seva in Hinduism, Zakkat in Islam. What is our spiritual practice of charity our moral imperative in Unitarian Universalism (UU)?

First, our UU congregations must continue to be gathering places for such activity. According to scholars Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson, we UUs are so-called “core cultural creatives,” a growing segment of the U.S. population—already over 25%—who embrace a new culture that values diversity, stewardship of the environment, economic justice, and civil rights for all, and combine these values with some form of spiritual practice or religious affiliation.

We do model that here in our Social Justice Allies and in the ways we partner with fusion coalitions such as UUAJAZ. And we are growing more confident about seeking out the truth on justice issues and how we relate to them from our social location, even if that truth makes us uncomfortable.

Which brings us back around to the passage from Mark 14: “The poor you will always have with you.” Scholars have debated the meaning of this verse. Is Jesus simply stating that this is the way the world will always be, one which includes a segment of the community who is poor? Regrettably, that may be true. Or, is this verse a call to service and action, reminding his disciples that they had better remember *to have the “poor always with them”* because they did, in fact, signed on as a compassion brigade. I’ll opt for that interpretation.

Why? Because we can be such a brigade, as well...counting ourselves among those who lean into simple gestures like the “kindness of lo mein” from our reading earlier, or slightly bigger acts such as serving at the Flagstaff Food Center or volunteering with voting rights or anti-racism groups, and perhaps (if I’ve inspired you sufficiently) even larger commitments we can make together like joining or supporting Rev. Barber’s Poor People’s Campaign with our financial resources, or with our voices and marching feet...and most definitely, with our votes.

He calls this campaign a moral revival, not just an economic activism. They are repairers of the breach, not pundits. Rev. Barber is extraordinarily dynamic...he had a bunch of UU’s at the 2016 GA in Columbus OH, swaying and amening like Pentecostals. Find him online and listen to a sermon. You’ll see.

Jim Wallis, a respected Liberal Christian social activist and writer, reminds us gently that “the critical difference between Jesus’ disciples and a middle -class church is precisely this: our lack of real proximity to the poor. The continuing relationship to the poor that Jesus assumes will be natural for his disciples is unnatural to a middle class or affluent church.”

That said, looking out from this YouTube pulpit, I see a congregation I know. And I know that some of us here are unemployed, underemployed, or struggling right now financially. Some of us are convincingly, but anxiously, “class-passing” in order to “fit it.” Some of us work with the poor—the ill, the homeless, the hungry—those captive in this debate. Wherever we fall on the economic spectrum, we can band with others beyond UUism through successful and strategic movements like the Poor Peoples Campaign, to change the very structures that hold us up and away from the social location of the poor.

So, I ask (as an invitation, rather than a scolding) : What will be the pebble in our shoes when we leave here today? How are we going to think about these issues and work on them *in real time* ? How might we savor the world and also save it? All minds, hearts, hands, and ideas are welcome.

Let us remember that “When we change, the world changes.” We’ll have to “leave home” in a sense, leave our comfortable ways of being, to find ourselves and our callings. *Elysium* offers a cautionary tale about a ravaged

future beyond repair. Let's build that better home in 2021, right here, right now, on Earth.

We'll need to develop a passionate discontent and a discipleship about the statement that "the poor you will always have with you." For in a truly shiny city on a hill, siding with love, this desperate reality need not endure.

So may we rise to be repairers of the breach. Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

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In NYT, Chelsea Leu writes about *Abundance*:

To be poor in America is to constantly be aware of how close you are to empty. Henry, the protagonist of “*Abundance*,” measures distances in gallons of gas, stockpiles free ketchup packets (“a reserve of sugar for later hunger pangs”), and scrimps enough money to treat his young son, Junior, to a birthday meal at McDonald’s and one night at a motel — a luxury after six months of washing up in public restrooms and sleeping in Henry’s pickup. It’s fitting that each chapter of Guanzon’s relentless novel begins with the amount of money Henry has: Unexpected expenses, over the course of one day, torpedo Henry’s careful plans toward upward mobility in an excruciating slow-motion cascade.

Throughout, we see glimpses of Henry’s past that explain his present: inherited medical debt, a five-year prison sentence for selling opioids that makes job prospects slim, the departure of Junior’s drug-addicted mother. “I’m right here,” Henry tells Junior over and over again; it’s all he has to offer. Close to the end of the book, though, this refrain morphs into a message to those who would avert their eyes from our societal ills. “Look at me, look at my son,” Henry says. “We’re right here.”

This is worthy but heavy stuff, and the novel occasionally staggers under the weight. Henry feels more like the sum of his identities — father, felon, half-Filipino — than a fully-fleshed character, consumed by his fears of turning into his own embittered immigrant dad. Instead, what “*Abundance*” captures is how mundane poverty is, and how psychologically punishing.