

What is at the root of everything that is wrong?

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This week in Adult Religious Education I was given a gift—an “Aha” moment. We are looking at “Saving Jesus from Christianity.” This week we asked the question, “Who was Jesus?” There were many answers offered: a wisdom teacher, a prophet, a healer, a mystic, but then one scholar said Jesus was a conversationalist. I had never had that insight before, but he’s right. The gospel is full of conversations Jesus has with a wide variety of people. When I reflect on those conversations he converses with me as well.

In further reflection, I thought about the power of conversation to build relationships, to broaden our understanding of the world—even change our worldview, to stir our imaginations, to test our ideas, to inspire us to act courageously or not to act destructively.

Not all conversations are created equal. George Bernard Shaw once described someone who had “lost the art of conversation, but not, unfortunately the power of speech.” Musician Nat Wolff compared a good conversation to jazz, “Jazz is smooth and cool. Jazz is rage. Jazz flows like water. Jazz never seems to begin or end. Jazz isn’t methodical, but jazz isn’t messy either. Jazz is a conversation, a give and take. Jazz is the connection and communication between musicians. Jazz is abandon.” The gift a good conversation offers is a journey into uncharted waters capable of taking us to unimaginable places full of new discoveries and new life.

Maurice Chevalier once said, “An artist carries on throughout his life a mysterious, uninterrupted conversation with his public.” I think that is true of preachers as well.

When the newsletter comes out with a list of topics for the month there is a temptation to see each week as an individual, isolated event that begins at 10:30 and ends with morning tea. Awhile back when I asked if you are a mystic, I explained that when we break the world into discrete parts we are using our rational, analytical selves—our default position as Unitarians. We divide reality into discrete parts, and give each part a name, so we can hold it in our minds and manipulate it. The mystic does the opposite, developing a direct, non-verbal awareness of the world, others, and his- or herself as a unity, as one, as a living whole. Where my individual sermons are concerned my hope is you will experience them like a mystic, not as a single event but as ongoing conversation that doesn’t end after morning tea, but continues in your feedback to me and conversations with others and unspoken in your mind. Conversation is the connective tissue between each sermon that creates the whole. But let me tell you a secret. I have no idea where the conversation will go. When I prepare the next month’s list of topics, each is just the germ of an idea. They spring from where we have been in the conversation. Often when it is time to prepare them they don’t go where I anticipated because the conversation has shifted or shaped my earlier thoughts.

That is no less true of today’s topic: What is at the root of everything that is wrong? It is what follows after two sermons on the Trump phenomenon that has only gotten more surreal in the last week, Rachel’s talk on the Future of Work and the ANZAC Sunday talk on how the tax havens of the 1% wreak war, destruction and chaos upon us.

George Monbiot recently wrote in *The Guardian*:

Imagine if the people of the Soviet Union had never heard of communism. The ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. Mention it in conversation and you'll be rewarded with a shrug. Even if your listeners have heard the term before, they will struggle to define it.

Its anonymity is both a symptom and cause of its power. It has played a major role in a remarkable variety of crises: the financial meltdown of 2007-8, the offshoring of wealth and power, of which the Panama Papers offer us merely a glimpse, the slow collapse of public health and education, resurgent child poverty, the epidemic of loneliness, the collapse of ecosystems, the rise of Donald Trump. But we respond to these crises as if they emerge in isolation, apparently unaware that they have all been either catalysed or exacerbated by the same coherent philosophy; a philosophy that has – or had – a name. What greater power can there be than to operate namelessly?

But it does have a name. It is neoliberalism, a word you have heard from me from time to time. “Why should this be an issue in church?” you might reasonably ask. The answer is that as Unitarians, we are glued together by our Seven Principles. Neoliberalism directly or indirectly undermines every one of our seven principles. It has become another human construct for god. We have been told that the market dictates how we are to live. It is all-powerful. It must not be interfered with. It must be obeyed. But it is not a loving and compassionate god, but a vengeful one, preferring to co-opt all that oppose it, as it has with political parties on the centre left. Yet, its moral position is that destroying its opposition is acceptable if it means preserving its divinity. The crushing of trade unions is an example. As one leading Auckland businessman told me this week, “Sure my employees can join a union. It’s irrelevant. Everyone knows unions are done and dusted.” Neoliberalism is sapping us of our spiritual connection with ourselves, our neighbours and our planet—none of which it cares about beyond its ability to exploit them for profit.

I see my task today to be Toto. Remember Toto? In the Wizard of Oz the wee pup pulls back the curtain exposing the man who pulls the levers controlling the great and terrible Oz. We cannot stand up against a nameless god and the invisible hands that manipulate it for their own gain, unless we know something about it and its creed.

We tend to think neoliberalism was the creation of Roger Douglas, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, but they were just the ones who sold it to an unsuspecting public. In truth, its ideas had been developed more than thirty years earlier. The term was coined in 1938. Two Austrian exiles fleeing Nazism, Ludwig von Mises and Frederich Hayek, took the term and gave it flesh. They saw the New Deal and Britain’s welfare state as being only different shades of Nazism and communism. Hayek argued that government planning crushed individualism and would lead to totalitarianism. Mises and Hayek’s books were widely read, especially by some very wealthy people who saw in their philosophy an opportunity to free themselves from regulation and tax. In 1947, Hayek founded the first of many organisations and think tanks funded by millionaires that would and still do spread the doctrine of neoliberalism. According to Monbiot, they created an international neoliberal network of academics, businessmen, journalists and activists. They even financed academic positions and departments at the universities of Chicago and Virginia.

Monbiot says that, as it evolved, neoliberalism become more strident. Neoliberal apostles such as Milton Friedman argued that governments should not prevent monopolies from forming, but should rewarded them for their efficiency.

At the same time it became more strident, it became nameless. In 1951, Friedman described himself as a neoliberal, but soon after the term began to disappear and was not replace by another. At the same time Monbiot says, “the ideology became crisper and the movement more coherent.”

For the next twenty years it bided its time. Keynesian economic principles were still being widely applied. Full employment and the relief of poverty were widely held goals in Europe and the US. Top tax rates were high and governments developed public services and safety nets without embarrassment. But in the 1970s economic crises hit the US and Europe and neoliberal ideas began to enter the mainstream with the help of sympathetic journalists and political advisors. Jimmy Carter’s administration and Jim Callaghan’s government in Britain cracked open the door to neoliberalism by picking up neoliberal monetary policies.

Thatcher, Reagan and later Douglas threw open the door, imposing the rest of the package of neoliberal ideas: massive tax cuts for the rich, the crushing of trade unions, deregulation, selling off of state assets, outsourcing and competition in public services.

The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation imposed neoliberal ideas without much or any democratic consent on most of the rest of the world. Sadly, there was plenty of support from the left to this conquest. Lest we forget, Roger Douglas was in a Labour government. Bill Clinton sold out labour in his pushing through the NAFTA neoliberal trade agreement and by repealing the Glass-Steagall Act, which had prevented commercial banks from offering securities, which lead directly to the global financial meltdown in 2008.

How did neoliberals sell their ideas as being divine revelation? In simplest terms they said only an unfettered free market protected individual freedom. But we didn’t read the small print. They meant freedom for the wealthy elite. In Monbiot’s words, “Freedom from trade unions and collective bargaining means the freedom to suppress wages. Freedom from regulation means the freedom to poison rivers, endanger workers, charge iniquitous rates of interest and design exotic financial instruments. Freedom from tax means freedom from the distribution of wealth that lifts people out of poverty.”

Perhaps the most pernicious of neoliberal ideas is that there are winners and losers. Winners deserved to win and losers should be punished. This is a very old idea that goes back to the days of the Prophet Jeremiah. The faithful are blessed and a demanding God punishes the unfaithful. The story of Job mocks this idea, but today there is no Job to mock Ronald Reagan’s derogatory “welfare queen” comments or Paula Bennett’s disdain and punishment of beneficiaries. A neoliberal god shows no mercy to those whose lives are being destroyed by a rigged system that has ripped huge holes in the safety net and privatised social services. This hasn’t happened by accident. It is part of the neoliberal creed.

And it is not just those at the bottom of the economic ladder who the neoliberal god disdains as losers. It is any of us who have insecure employment, try to survive on stagnant wages as costs continue to soar, are deeply in debt because of rising housing costs or student loans, subsidise companies that refuse to pay the creators of their wealth a living wage, or pay taxes to bail out too-big-to-fail banks or corporations who now own our public assets. The individual, who was promised freedom by this god, has none except what they choose to buy, if they have the money to buy it. The result is powerlessness that has resulted in the disenfranchisement of the poor and middle classes.

It is not an accident that the biggest losers no longer see any point in voting when they are offered only different degrees of neoliberal orthodoxy. It's why the million plus voters who did not vote in our last election were more likely to be from places like South Auckland than Epsom. In America, to make sure the losers don't vote, onerous voter ID laws have been enacted and on Election Day they are given fewer polling places.

But things are beginning to shift. Monbiot argues that the 2008 global financial meltdown exposed the failure of neoliberalism. He describes it as a Zombie economic system. I find the extraordinary rise of Donald Trump to be one indication. The losers are rising up and The Donald is their pitchfork. His supporters feel they have nothing left to lose so voting for a racist xenophobe who casts himself as independent of the nameless neoliberals is a reasonable thing to do. Never mind that neoliberalism gave him his wealth and influence. While improbable, it is quite possible that in reaction to neoliberalism, Donald Trump might become president. It appears that their only alternative will be Hillary who has the support of Wall Street, and whose husband was a neoliberal apostle in democratic clothing. He was the poster-child for the Democratic Leadership Council formed in the wake of Reagan's landslide victory. Millionaires who wanted the Democratic Party to turn away from the social democratic ideas of the New Deal to accept Reaganomics as their platform funded it.

The election of either as the leader of the greatest economic power on the planet is not something to look forward to in my mind. The Zombie god will continue to walk the planet it is systematically destroying.

If we are to defend and protect our seven principles and maintain our spiritual health, we need to have lots of conversations with our family and friends, on social media and in Unitarian pulpits everywhere naming the root of all that is wrong. We must encourage and support academics, journalists, business people, economists, politicians and activists developing new economic models that protect the planet, end inequality, and restore democracy or I fear we face extinction.

I'm not sure what the answers will be, but I believe they will come from mystical insight. We will begin to change things when we understand that everything on the planet is a collective. When we see "The Other" as part of ourselves, we will see them worthy of love and respect. If one of us loses we all lose. Winning needs to mean no one or the planet loses. So lets talk about it. It is certainly a conversation worth having.