



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

We would be one

1. Clay Nelson © 24 February 2019

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This week a Royal Commission rolled out proposals to the Government to change the tax structure with the goal of addressing income and wealth inequality. Part of their overall recommendations was a capital gains tax on investment income. As I understand it distinguished and varied experts in these matters don't think it would be the end of the world if unearned income was taxed at the same rate as earned income. I'm pretty sure you have heard about it. Even if you live under a rock the sound and fury expressed in the media's megaphones has been deafening, presumably by those who have investment income and the power and privilege to have their grievances heard far and wide.

Now, it is patently obvious I'm not a chartered accountant or a tax lawyer. I don't even have skin in the game. Only charlatans in my line of work are likely to have much in the way of investment income. I consider myself exceedingly fortunate in 2019 New Zealand to jointly own a house with Rachel and the bank. I accept that I am not the ideal person to analyse the fine print in the Commission's recommendations, but I'm as qualified as anyone to have a view of their intent. When the Commission was established it was with the intent to begin a conversation about how tax reform might help address the staggering and growing inequality in our country. Yet Simon Bridges, leader of the opposition party, has decried it as a declaration of war against the kiwi way of life. I would invite Simon to tone it down a little. Declaring a state of war right from the get-go is not generally recommended for encouraging a conversation. Besides, from my time in New Zealand, very few recommendations by Royal Commissions ever see the light of day in law. I suspect few, if any, of these recommendations will by the time those with the power and privilege and access to do so have terrified everyone into believing that giving all kiwis a fair go is a nice idea but impractical.

If that is where all this leads, it is tragic to my mind. We could be using the opportunity to remember that we might all be different in our experiences and circumstances of life, but we are all in the same boat. If those who own the boat keep pushing everyone else to the back with the motor so they can stay high dry on the bow, it is eventually going to sink. Giving everyone teaspoons to bail it out is not going to save us. What might? Let me begin a conversation.

In his little book *Being Peace* (1987), Thich Nhat Hanh the Vietnamese Buddhist recounts a story about a father and daughter, circus performers. The father would balance a very long bamboo pole on his forehead, and his daughter would climb to the top of the pole. People watching would give them money to buy food to eat.

“One day the father told the daughter, ‘My dear daughter, we have to take care of each other. You have to take care of your father, and I have to take care of you, so that we will be safe. Our performance is very dangerous.’ Because if she fell, both would not be able to earn their living. If she fell, then broke her leg, they wouldn't have anything to eat. ‘My daughter, we have to take care of each other so we can continue to earn our living.’”

This is the social ethic I grew up with: taking care of one another. Some call it altruism, that I am responsible for the well-being of others through my practice of kindness and generosity, that my own happiness will flow from my relationships of loving-kindness with others.

In a capitalist society of individual rewards and private failures, we need a sense of interdependence and mutual support. In a society of great accumulation of wealth and deep, demoralising poverty, we need to feel compassion. Where there is mass starvation amidst undistributed plenty, we need an ethic of generosity. Where distribution of weapons is profitable, where ignoring those they harm or displace is acceptable as the cost of doing business, we need a social ethic calling us to serve the common good. That's altruism.

But this story about the father and daughter circus performers caught me off-guard. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that the daughter was very wise. She said to her father: "Each one of us has to take care of himself or herself, so that we can continue to earn our living.... during the performance, you take care of yourself, you take care of yourself only. You stay very stable, very alert. That will help me. And if when I climb I take care of myself, I climb very carefully, I do not let anything wrong happen to me.... The Buddhist monk said, '... our happiness depends on each other.' According to that teaching I have to take care of myself, and you take care of yourself. That way we help each other.... I have to take care of myself, knowing that I am responsible for your happiness, and if you do the same, everything will be all right."

All around me, people live a competitive consumer society, competing to get ahead of one another, competing to accumulate abundance for themselves which will allow them to live better and better private lives among those of similar privilege and abundance, separate from the squalor of poverty, poverty of material resources and poverty of productive skills. Certainly this is not what is intended by the story's conclusion that: "I have to take care of myself, and you take care of yourself."

The pop philosopher Ayn Rand glorified exceptional people as worthy of accumulated wealth and privilege in her books, *The Fountainhead* and *The Virtue of Selfishness*. But she failed to acknowledge the fact of the interdependence of life, that our individual condition of life is more "an accident of birth" to first-world privilege than to exceptional personal effort. Once we are aware of all the conditions that support us to develop our individual gifts, it becomes unethical to "pull up the ladder behind us," to deny others the conditions necessary to develop their gifts as well. Awareness of all the material privileges and social supports that facilitate individual success and productivity, leads away from egoism and back to altruism. How then do we understand the wisdom of the daughter in the story: "I have to take care of myself, knowing that I am responsible for your happiness, and if you do the same, everything will be all right"?

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about the Vietnamese boat people. The boat people experienced enormous suffering. Half died in the ocean. Hanh received a letter telling about a young girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate. She was only twelve, and she jumped into the ocean and drowned. He writes:

"When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. (... it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate.) As you look more deeply you will see it differently.... In my meditation I saw that if I had been born

in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, I am now the pirate. There is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate.... In my meditation, I saw that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we... do not do something about the situation, in 25 years a number of them will become sea pirates. That is certain. If you or I were born today in those fishing villages, we might become sea pirates in 25 years. If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs.”

The question arises: Who am I? Who are you? Without awareness of the arbitrary conditions that give rise to my condition of life, to the pirate’s condition of life, without awareness, it is easy simply to claim moral superiority, to accept praise for being so productive, so nice and to justify violent retribution against the pirate.

We’ve all heard it said, that “There but for the grace of God go I.” Of course, the graciousness of God becomes suspect when you think about all those unfortunates from whom a selective kind of God must have chosen to withhold good fortune. But beyond the shadow side of the story, don’t miss the wisdom of the saying. The circumstances of my birth, undeserved favour, are all that separate me from the pirate. Are we able to see ourselves, not only as the 12-year-old girl, the victim? Are we able to see ourselves as the pirate?

“Comprehend” is a term which comes from the French, *com* meaning to be one or together, and from *prendre* meaning to take or to grasp. To comprehend is to grasp, to be grasped by our togetherness, our oneness.

The Buddha said that “in order to understand, you have to be one with what you want to understand.” If you just look, if you look you will see deeper than the small sense of yourself as being self-created and see the greater connectedness, the large self. If you just look, you can empty yourself of the small, egoistic, independent self-perception and be grasped by oneness.

A monk was once asked whether meditation, especially a life of meditation in a monastery, is not an escape from society. A very challenging question. The monk replied: “You bring all society, all of life with you into meditation. Perhaps being self-absorbed in our individual lives is more of an escape from the reality of life, the reality of shared suffering and transient joys. Perhaps self-absorption is an escape from our interconnectedness and mutual responsibility, an escape from being grasped by the oneness of life, our larger self.”

Thich Nhat Hanh echoes the monk: “I think that our society is a difficult place to live. If we are not careful, we can become uprooted, and once uprooted, we cannot help change society to make it more liveable. Meditation is a way of helping us stay in society.... when you go into meditation, you bring with you all the scars, all the wounds from society, and you bring the whole society as well.”

Being grasped by oneness — comprehending — discloses that the separate individual, the small self is an illusion.

The Buddhist monk explains: “If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there will be no water; without water, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, you cannot make paper. So the cloud is in here....

Sunshine is very important because the forest cannot grow without sunshine, and we humans cannot grow without sunshine. So the logger needs sunshine in order to cut the tree, and the tree needs sunshine in order to be a tree. Therefore you can see sunshine in this sheet of paper. And if you look more deeply... with the eyes of those who are awake, you see not only the cloud and the sunshine in it, but that everything is here: the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat, the logger's father—everything is in this sheet of paper....”

Thich Nhat Hanh asks: “Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other?”
Try it. Look at the other faces in the boat.