

God's Left Hand

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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To me, the concept of God is an attempt to put into words and images our human understanding of the nature of this world. To assign human characteristics to this understanding is as natural as assuming a flower following the sun loves that sun just as we do. There is a significant value to this anthropomorphism, the assigning of human qualities to the non-human, in the obvious symbolic meaning that emerges from the use of what is so familiar to us, because it *is* us. We were not created in God's image – I'm pretty sure it was the other way around. But it has been a very useful way to figure things out about ourselves.

This morning I want to talk about God's hands – those parts of God that “do” things, just as we do things with our hands. In our world our hands act because our brain makes them act. To attribute to God's respective hands specific kinds of doing assumes that same causal use of a mind, God's mind. And it appears, given the God we have created in our own image, that in our understanding of the nature of the world we are of two minds. Just as we have two sides to our brain that control the opposite sides of our bodies, God has two hands that are controlled by the two sides of God's brain. This imagery is realistic because clearly the God of the Bible is also of two minds.

When I read the Bible, which I have to admit isn't very often now that it's not required reading for a class tomorrow morning, I am struck by the realism – the real human condition – it portrays. And it does so through a God that acts very much like we do, conflicted about how best to help these people, through punishment and affliction, or through love and compassion. Just like people, God sees the world through different lenses. It sounds familiar. Our TV shows refer to it as the Bad Cop, Good Cop routine. Will God smite us and turn us into a pillar of salt? Or will God forgive and give us the opportunity to try again?

Michael Lerner has taken this imagery of a God with two hands, controlled by different sides of a brain, and compared it to what he calls the two dominant world views in action today. The right hand of this God symbolizes thinking that focuses on power, domination, and fear. In this understanding, human beings are each acting in their own best self interest and assuming everyone else is doing the same thing. The right hand of God works on the assumption that the world is basically a scary place, in which we must make alliances to protect our families and our communities. It is a divisive way to think and act. It is the view dominant in the media today as well as in many of our spiritual communities, particularly, as Lerner says, in what we refer to as the Religious Right.

The left hand of God is about another way to view the world. In this view human beings are not essentially alone and fighting for themselves, but rather in honest, sincere, and interdependent connection with others. It is similar to what we Unitarian Universalists express in our seventh principle, emphasizing the connectivity of the interdependent web

of existence. God's left hand reinforces acts of love, caring and generosity and our human capacity to be in deep and loving relationships. Our protection comes not from alliances of power but from alliances of love. Lerner emphasizes the importance to this view of the kind example we are shown by the unconditional mothering we receive when we are very young, for which our nurturers receive no immediate rewards.

Michael Lerner is a Rabbi, living in the San Francisco/Berkely, CA, area. He has a doctorate degree in both philosophy and clinical psychology and is the editor of Tikkun magazine. I brought a few copies with me this morning if you'd like to look them over. I highly recommend them, and love Lerner's description of this publication as not just a Jewish magazine but an interfaith movement. That really is what he is advocating. The things he has to say are universally appropriate – I love them.

The word tikkun is a Hebrew word having to do with healing, repair and transformation. It is part of another Hebrew expression, tikkun olam, which means to heal the world. It is, I believe, what we are all trying to do, from whatever direction we approach this loftiest of visions.

Lerner has recently been traveling the country advocating for the changes he is proposing in The Left Hand of God. He spoke at UMass recently, and although I had written him in my calendar more than a month in advance, a very important UUSA committee meeting found its way to the top of my priority list and I could not attend the lecture. But I was fortunate to come by a video of his talk to American University in Washington, DC, in which I'm sure he was saying similar things to what I would have heard in Amherst.

In The Left Hand of God, Lerner puts together a number of ideas that lead one logically to his ultimate conclusion and list of suggestions. First of all, he clearly states that we live the entirety of our lives in tension between the views represented by the right and left hands of God. We struggle always between acting out of power or acting out of love and generosity. Real truth, real life, is a balance – one or the other does not tell the whole picture.

But does it seem to you that one view has become the more prevalent in much of our lives and in much of the whole world?

In his book, Lerner writes that our task is to reaffirm to everyone the possibility that violence and control are not necessary to create a just and peaceful world. Lerner wants to reaffirm the possibility of the left hand of God, and alter the justification of using God to have power over people as the Religious Right sometimes does.

Michael Lerner and his associates have spent over 40 years conducting extensive surveys of the American people about how they see their world and what makes it and them tick. The two major findings that have emerged from this work are that 1) the bottom line in this country, as indeed in most of the world, is the maximization of power and money and most of us learn very quickly how to survive in this kind of a world and 2) at the same time as we are all using each other to get ahead we are also realizing that we wish it were

another way. We hate that the world is this way. We feel dirty and uncomfortable with the way we live and work in a dog eat dog world, but we think there are no alternatives.

He found that there is a crisis today of values and friendships – many people described their friendships as feeling “thinner” than what used to be. And this systemic maximization of our self interests plays itself out in our marriages as well, even the ones that don’t end in divorce. How many of us suffer with thoughts that our partner will find someone else, any day now, who will better meet their needs? The degree of our insecurity depends on how much younger, conventionally attractive, and financially secure we are. There is a crisis in our families and in our relationships that manifests itself at every turn. And it is not gays and lesbians, feminists, liberals, secular society, or activist judges, as the religious right would have us believe.

He sums up his findings by saying that there is a spiritual crisis in this country today and that many people are drawn to the Religious Right because they are the only ones addressing it – using the words – if perhaps in what we would say is a skewed approach. He would have the Left, the liberals and the progressives find their voice to speak to this spiritual crisis in a way that uses the view from God’s left hand. Michael Lerner wants us to have a new core vision for our lives, a new bottom line in American Society. Here are what he thinks are the major changes that need to be addressed:

First, we need new definitions of productivity, rationality and efficiency. And we need to think about why the current meanings of these have become our ultimate values. Lerner calls for a spiritual way of looking at the world (and he quickly points out that he does not necessarily mean conventionally religious when he talks about being spiritual) in which the irrational, the unproductive and the inefficient become our new goals. Obviously this could be taken to a new and equally undesirable end, but just in saying these highly charged words (irrational, unproductive, inefficient) we get an inkling of the direction he would have us move. He doesn’t like the increasingly common assumption that something isn’t real if it can’t be measurably described. A spiritual way of looking at the world challenges the notion that sense datum is the only datum that counts. He is calling for a lot more non-sense, if I may call it that.

His second vision for the world is one that maximizes love, generosity and caring. One could call it compassion. A new understanding would arise of the sanctity of the “other.” This is a seriously important vision to think about and perhaps might be the subject of an adult education opportunity for next year. It encompasses many of the distressing aspects of societies, like racism and classism. What would it mean to hold “the other” – all of our “others” - in higher regard.? What would a world without all our “isms” be like?

In Michael Lerner’s new vision there would be increased awe and amazement at the wonder of creation and being itself, something we seem to have lost along the way. Our environmental sensitivity would become second nature as we lived and worked toward the survival of our planet, not its destruction.

Our new spiritual consciousness would help us see both others and the world as embodiments of the sacred.

Lastly, it is unreasonable to assume that any society can exist without the existence of power and the use of money. But the crisis in which we find ourselves calls for us to find some perspective on what has become a huge imbalance in our priorities.

I liked it that Lerner leaves his audience with some tangible examples of what a world might look like when God's left hand becomes as powerful as God's right hand, when our values are actually in line with our interests. "What would a University look like," he asks, "if efficiency in the market place was not its goal, but rather how has it produced environmentally sensitive people, or how many of its graduates went to work in social change movements?"

What if every fourth grader was given a first grader to mentor for the next eight years? How would the values that child would learn, about caring and being responsible for someone else, change their lives and that of everyone they come in contact with for the rest of their lives?

What if there was a social responsibility amendment added to our constitution that called for every 50 million dollar and up corporation to be required to apply for a new corporate charter every ten years that would be granted based on their history of social responsibility as judged by a panel of ordinary citizens?

Do you think this all sounds just a little bit pie in the sky? Or is that our hopelessness talking? It will take courage, many acts of courage by millions of people, to stand up for a different set of values. Who wants to be fired for not being "tiger" enough to maximize the corporate power structure and its bottom line?

I can easily sympathize with anyone who might hear all this and say, but I have to feed my family. I have debts to pay and without my job I'll end up on the street. I can't imagine anyone wants that. But perhaps just by talking about the subject, by planting the seed of hope for a more spiritually prioritized society, there may arise opportunity for even the slightest of changes at times in our lives.

Here is an example from my own life – something that will require a decision by me and the Board of this Society in the next year. The UUA is now offering health insurance to ministers and other staff of our congregations. That is, if they get enough ministers and staff to sign up! This insurance will include spouses as well as partners regardless of their sex. It will be available for anyone working at least half time for one of our congregations. This insurance will travel with ministers from settlement to settlement and continue into retirement as well. There are no clauses for pre-existing conditions, and premiums will be the same regardless of the area of the country in which you live.

There is a purposeful – principled – religious basis for the organization of this health insurance plan. But for many, it will cost more than they are currently paying for their

existing insurance. The question will be, it is worth paying more for a plan that will offer so much to so many? What are we willing to pay for insurance done right – as compared to insurance done more cheaply? It will be interesting to have these discussions. For larger congregations, the decision to go with the more expensive UUA plan will not be as financially significant as it will be for smaller congregations such as ourselves.

I think this is the kind of courageous visioning – and action - that Michael Lerner is talking about.

He says “Come out of the closet as a spiritual being.”

“Commit your life to a higher vision of the good.”

“Don’t let that which is define that which can be.”

“In the end, let us bring more love, more kindness, and more healing to our world.”

Michael Lerner ends his traveling presentation with words I would love to hear out of the mouths of any of our government representatives.

“And may God bless America – and everyone else in the world.”

Blessed be.