

Chaos or Commons?

Jamaica Plain, January 20, 2008, Chuck Collins

Several years ago, my partner Tricia Brennan, our daughter Nora and I lived in Oaxaca Mexico for a year. Nora went to Fourth Grade, Tricia took a break from her ministry work, I worked long distance, thanks to the internet. Our goal was to learn Spanish, make friends and be together.

One of our favorite weekend activities was to venture into the Sierra Norte highlands. At 10,000 feet there were indigenous villages that had existed autonomously and independently -- even under Spanish colonial rule. They had traditional government, a rotating system of village elders -and traditional land ownership, with land owned in common.

I was very curious about this. I asked everyone I met: So how does it work? If you needed land -you went to the village elders to get an allotment to build a house, plant crops. Your land claim could be passed onto children if they remained in the community and fulfilled their community obligations. But the land could not be sold to outsiders.

As a result, there was no absentee ownership. There were beautiful villages with no vacation homes, no Marriott hotel chains. To get land, you had to fulfill your obligations as a community member: periodic workdays, contributions to festivals, participation in government.

I always asked: What happen when someone got greedy -and takes more than their fair share. Or rents it to others. Or abuses the land? Or overgrazes it? I got puzzled looks. People's response was "Why would we do that? That would upset the balance? Balancia. If someone is poor and hungry, that upsets the balance. No one is rich here, but no one is poor."

I was struck how deeply my Zapotec indian friends and acquaintances had internalized different values, a profoundly different way of thinking. This is like the indigenous perspective on land: "We don't own land. The land owns US." Or the great theologian Crocodile Dundee who said: "People arguing about who owns land is like two fleas arguing over who owns the dog."

Changing How We Think

Thinking differently is our challenge. At the root of many problems is a deformity in how we think: White supremacy, racism, anti-semitism, patriarchy, nationalism....the warped idea that one group or race is inherently superior to another. Violence toward others flows from a distorted belief that someone else is less than fully human. A good society makes laws against discrimination and oppression. But we know that real change happens when we change how we think. But this is no small undertaking.

At a recent Jamaica Plain Forum, 150 people crammed into our Parish Hall to hear Ross Gelbspan talk about the climate crisis. Ross said, "We have FAILED" to change fast enough -we need to pick up the pace. We need to step it up in terms of CHANGING HOW WE THINK and respond. We think we are apart from the earth. We think our actions have no consequences. We think we can find some miraculous technological fix to escape our demise."

In my day job, I work as a researcher and organizer on the issue of the growing gap between the rich and everyone else. In the last thirty years -we have pulled apart at a dramatic pace. We are living with an unprecedented concentration of wealth and power. We tolerate these inequalities, in part, because of how we think. We believe that all wealth is individually created and deserved. We believe that the distribution of wealth has something to do with merit or effort.

Chaos or Community

Dr Martin Luther King gave a speech 40 years ago, "Where do we go from here? It was his last speech as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He called us to go forward with "divine dissatisfaction:" "Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice." In 40 years since King's death, we have moved to greater levels of chaos, ecological destruction and economic disparity. We have moved to new levels of extreme individualism-and market fundamentalism -a belief in the market as God. For 40 years, we have been wandering in the desert. But now we must change how we think -and change how we treat one another and the planet. Personally, I'm counting on a rapid acceleration and evolution in human consciousness. I believe we have a tremendous capacity to change how we think. But we need to pick up the pace.

The Commons

Recently, I've heard about an interesting way to think about the resources and wealth we hold together. It's an old idea really-the notion of commons or common wealth. But it is gaining steam in new books like Peter Barnes, *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons*. [See resource list at the end]. The commons refers to the stuff we hold together OR that none of us should properly own. The commons is not just the notion of common good or community. It refers to real stuff, real assets and wealth -that we hold or manage in common. It includes nature, but also the socially created institutions and wealth that we hold together. It is the stuff that no individual or private corporation should own.

The easiest forms of commons to see are Nature: Air, water, seeds, topsoil, minerals, airwaves, oceans, fisheries, forests lakes. It is clear that these things are the source of life -and that they should not be privately owned -but held in trust not just for us -but for all species. Matthew Fox, in his writing on *Creation Spirituality*, calls this our "original blessing." He says one of the big defects in how we think is anthropocentric -being overly human-centered. We think ALL THESE GIFTS ARE FOR US! The other types of

commons are less visible. These include our community wealth -things we build together -streets, playgrounds, libraries, museums, farmers markets, Craigslist, Wikipedia. The Commons includes culture: language, philosophy, jazz, ballet, hip hop, math, the internet, medicine and the knowledge of healing plants, recipes, astronomy.

Peter Barnes writes: "The Commons includes the gifts of nature, plus the gifts of society that we share and inherit together -and that we have an obligation to pass on to our heirs, undiminished and more or less equally." I like that he uses the word GIFT. How else can we think about these things? The gifts of nature. Gifts of God. Blessings of creation. And gifts from our ancestors. And OBLIGATION to pass onto next generations and future species. Our first challenge with the commons is to SEE it. Once we see it we can RECLAIM it, MANAGE it and even ENLARGE it. In our culture of extreme individualism -the individual is IN FOCUS. And Commons --that makes all life possible - is OUT OF FOCUS or INVISIBLE.

The fact that we don't see it works well for those who loot the commons, dump into it, enclose it and fence it off. We don't see how our common wealth, our commons, has been taken from us by those who would turn it into a commodity. Wikipedia? Who owns it? It is a knowledge commons, created by its users. You can be sure that some corporation would love to OWN Wikipedia and sell advertising on the site.

Something happened to me personally when I started to see the commons and noticed what was happening to it. The first emotion I felt was gratitude. It really is remarkable the gift that we have been given -and the social wealth that preceded us. This gratitude instills an obligation -to pass the gift along. The second emotion I felt was deep offense, anger, outrage really. In the same way I might be aggravated if someone took my coat or car.

One of the most colorful moments of the Jamaica Plain Forum was when we had a protester inside one of our events who was bothering our speaker. At the end of our event our First Church bouncer team -including Monroe Heyman, David Dorney, Reverend

Terry Burke -- escorted our disgruntled guest to the door. Terry noticed he had a hymnal in his jacket and he said, "You are a THIEF!" If there were every a moment for a Unitarian Universalist lightning bolt to strike, that was it.

That's what happens when we start to see the commons: We want to yell STOP THIEF

Water is a commons. Yet we tolerate private companies when they pump water from our aquifers and water systems, put them in plastic bottles and sell it back to us. Seeds have been traded and passed on for generations. Yet we allow Monsanto company to take seeds, and patent them and sell them back to us. We allow folk songs, hip hop and music that has been in the public domain for generations to become the intellectual property of someone. There is nothing wrong with artists earning a living and claiming ownership of something. But the property rights people have gone overboard.

Anyone here ever a Girl Scout? A few years ago the Girl Scouts were informed that the songs they sing around the campfire --songs like Puff the Magic Dragon, Edelweiss, This Land is Your Land -are private property. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers sent a letter demanding an annual royalty payment. They backed down after negative publicity, but it reminded us that culture is a commons. How long should culture be owned and locked down? Since most music is a gift from the commons --- derivative and passed down...what should be privately owned?

Traditional medicine and knowledge of plants are a commons. Yet this has now been enclosed by private drug companies and for-profit health corporations. They will patent and package this traditional knowledge and sell it to us. IF YOU PAY ENOUGH, you can be healthy.

We allow wealthy individuals and corporations -and the media conglomerates to hijack our democratic system of choosing leaders. Now, LONG BEFORE WE CAST A VOTE, we are told who the acceptable two or three candidates to choose from are. Our Democracy Commons has been enclosed and we have been disenfranchised. There are

many examples of the commons being enclosed and looted. Common wealth is being siphoned away from under our noses -and is sitting in private bank accounts.

It's enough to make you want to yell STOP THIEF!

One way I got interested in the commons was through my work to preserve the federal estate tax -and the underlying arguments about the sources of wealth. I worked closely with Bill Gates Sr, the father of the founder of Microsoft, to make a public case about why a good society should levy a tax on transfers of inherited wealth over \$2 million. In one talk he gave, he said: "if someone has \$10 million or \$20 million or \$40 billion in wealth -they did not do it alone. Their wealth came in large part from the society -and the public investments and common wealth that made it possible. Things like our education system, publicly funded research, our capital markets and legal mechanisms, our transportation and technological advances ---these are what makes great wealth possible."

"You may be creative and work hard...and should be rewarded for your efforts. Private enterprise and initiative are essential in a good and free society. But consider the help you got along the way: libraries, high schools, teachers, libraries, mentors." His message was: "no one does it alone. The wealth of the commons is what makes it all possible. And those who benefit greatly from our shared investments have an obligation to pay back the society -and recycling the opportunities that they had." He is essential talking about a commons -and how our common wealth makes private wealth possible. To say this doesn't diminish or devalue the role of the individual. Its just a simple fact that none of us do it alone.

I remember looking out at one audience of 250 small business owners and noticing that they were misty eyed, weeping and clearly moved by this conversation. I think it was because, deep down, even if we mentally don't see it, we are hard-wired to recognize we depend on the commons -that we are "nothing without each other."

Our Local Commons

We are individuals IN community. That is one of the ways we need to change how we think. Extreme individualism and market fundamentalism are leading to Chaos. As Dr King posed the question: Chaos or Community? I ask: Chaos or Commons? We want to lift up and celebrate the individual artist, entrepreneur, the individual effort. But at the same time acknowledge the commons, see its powerful influence on our lives. Think about the commons that we have built and manage together in our community.

Think about our Jamaica Pond -and the work that Gerry Wright and others have done to defend this commons. A good commons needs to be managed, have rules, sometimes even barriers to entry. Our church community that we have built here is a commons. No one owns it alone. We hold it together. It survives on our gifts of time, treasure, talent. People we have never met constructed this building. Today we are the stewards. Tomorrow another generation will hold it in trust.

We have a challenge ahead, which is to help one another change how we think. Together, we must adapt to the rapidly changing ecological and social environment. It can only happen in community. It cannot be figured out in isolation. What better place than here? What better place than a spiritual community -to assign ourselves the project of coming together to reclaim the commons. In this coming year, we shall have circle dinners, fellowship events. We will have social action letter writing campaigns and Jamaica Plain Forum discussions and workshops. We will break bread and offer mutual aid to one another. My Sunday School class proposed, on their own, a service project -to help the church become greener. You'll be hearing from them.

Let the struggles ahead - climate crisis and economic dislocation -- be opportunities to deepen our commitment and flex our muscles together. Let us cultivate together our "divine dissatisfaction" -our holy unrest -our disquiet over the theft of what belongs to none of us and all of us. Let us together yell "Stop Thief." In the words of Dr. King: "Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds."

And let us together, see the gifts of the commons. There is spiritual work to be done to deepen our gratitude, to see the interconnections, to practice our obligations of passing on the GIFTS.

Let us hold the gifts of the commons together. May our community be a place to practice divine dissatisfaction and gratitude.