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Social Justice



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In Imam Jamal Rahman's *Sacred Laughter of the Sufis*, he tells a story that may have as much to teach us today as it taught the desert Sufis centuries ago. Life, the ancients knew, all depends on our willingness to collaborate, to do the things together that are important for us all.

A teaching on the limitations that come from individual dysfunctions is illustrated by the classic tale of two men, one lame and the other blind, who were invited to the king's banquet. Both men despaired of being able to go because of their handicaps. The journey was too long and difficult for the lame man, and the blind man would not be able to find his way.

But when they lamented their difficulty at a community gathering, the mullah came up with a solution. The lame man, he showed them, could piggyback on the blind man and then use his eyes to guide the strong legs of his blind companion.

And so, because of their mutual cooperation, both men were able to attend the king's banquet. Both men were able to be an active part of their society. Both could bring their own gifts to it.

It's the kind of story this country needs more and more every day.

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Yes, it's a strange time. Politicians don't even seem to be trying to be civil to one another anymore. Everybody wants something else, more of this or less of that, but who knows what really? And do we want it for us or for them?

Clearly, it is a time of agitation and uncertainty, but it's an important time, too. Something is crackling in the airwaves everywhere. Little seems simply routine anymore; surely something big is on the way. But what? And if it does come, then

what?

This is actually an exciting time — and down deep we know it. It's not "more of the same" anymore. It is a time beyond yesterday and too soon for tomorrow. It is somewhere we never intended to go but which now has the feeling of coming. In our time. Where we are. In social collapse, maybe. In the shrinking of democracy, perhaps ... to the control of robots, and artificial intelligence, and pathological individualism, and random violence, and, possibly, spiritual depth rather than simply religious rules.

It is, in other words, also time for great faith. But what does that mean, really? A great deal.

This awareness of our own responsibility for this country, for this globe, is the faith of which Scripture speaks. It is more than the childlike "faith" we grew up on about God solving our problems while we sit back, hymnbooks and bidding prayers in hand, and wait to be saved. It is about tilling and tending, about dominion and purpose. About taking the creation that God began and ourselves finishing the project.

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This adult faith rests in the conscious awareness that God — the creator God who has given us everything we need to solve our own problems, if we only will — is really with us.

As we struggle to find the way to equality, to peace, to global collaboration ourselves, this God companions us all the way, holds us up, renews our energy, stokes our commitment, inflames our sense of personal responsibility to be part of the solutions we need to find together now, rather than self-centered part of the problems.

It is now, without doubt, time to stand up and demand justice, equality, freedom and a new worldview. To demand it — both alone and together.

In a grossly unequal world, we see the whole rest of the world trying to become part of our own very manicured life. So, now how shall we make them feel at home as they become our new labor force, a new population, a new beginning with fresh energy and high hopes? Or alone and refusing to collaborate, shall we turn them away? And then who and what shall we ourselves be?

One thing for sure, we are clearly somewhere beyond the Baltimore Catechism and its answers for everything from "Who is God?" to "Who are we?"

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And we are just as far away from secular advice to "simply forget it." As in, "There's nothing you and I can do about it anyway" as we listen to the scientists tell us now that we're running out of time to deal with climate change because we didn't really take it that seriously before this. Until the floods, and the tornadoes, and the lack of water, and the heaps of public damage that come with every storm demand more and more from us. All of us together.

It is a world, our world, in the midst of transformation.

The institutions that have been developing for over a century are busy now, attending to the cracks in their own structures.

Financial systems are facing moments of unsteadiness enough to make the average breadwinner unsteady as well.

Churches, our own right here in the middle of a progressive history, are being shuttered or merged. Attendance at Mass, once a Catholic given, has dropped.

Educational data tells us that American students no longer top the academic charts or can expect their great discoveries will now go on leading other parts of the world where education has become everything to everybody else, too.

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There is no "as usual" time now. Because, without doubt, our strength, our unity and, maybe if we're lucky, the grit of our diversity depend on meeting these differences and, hard as it may seem, taking responsibility together and making them work.

The point? That old world when we sat on our porches at night and watched kids kick balls down the dark street has melted away somehow. Instead, life is just one upheaval after another for all of us. It isn't that life has become wholesale bad; it's just that it's become uncontrollable while we wait for somebody else to take a role in the changes that must be made.

Extremists, of course, are trying to restore the old ways where they found security. But yesterday's uncertainties and fears have never resurrected the past. Banning children's books, flouting white nationalism, and swaggering down city streets with guns on our hips — so we can become part of the violence we say we're out to avoid — can only divide the country that should be one.

There is so much else to be done to make the future a tonic rather than a threat. So much more psychologically healthy, socially bonded, politically mature and spiritually developed leadership to enable us to see with the eyes of those around us and allow ourselves to learn how to carry the rest to fullness of life.

It may be time to ask ourselves questions. As in, what groups do we belong to? What charities do we support? What activities do we want the family to be part of? And we must ask ourselves also why do we stay silent about our own concerns about party politics and the partisanship it breeds, about recycling and the need for universal education and the leadership that we need as a result?

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Maybe we took our world too much for granted. Perhaps we just stopped noticing or caring or getting involved in what was going on around us.

So what changed it all?

From where I stand, when society was crumbling in Israel, the Scriptures condemned two things clearly. First, Israel's lack of commitment to the word of God. Second, its failure to commit itself to the goals of the good life — equality, justice, freedom and the awareness of the presence of God.

We are failing to carry one another — the blind and the lame in us — to the coming of a new worldview and a commitment to an adult faith.

As the Sufi saying puts it, "Beneath every ruin is a treasure." What we're going through right now, as a culture and a country, cannot be stolen from us; it can, however, begin to slip away as each of us do little or nothing serious to save it.

And therein is the cry for transformation: the movement away from what is no longer life-giving to the group; the movement toward what we must become if this new world that is upon us can become the kind of greatness that brought all of us this far.

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