

# Poverty in a Nation of Plenty

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Panel talk by Andrew Kang Bartlett, November 11, 2005*

There is a story about a little boy who had never spoken. His parents took him to a variety of specialists, but nothing helped; the boy remained completely silent for thirteen years. Then suddenly one morning, sitting at breakfast with his parents, he said, "The cocoa's cold." "What?!" cried his astonished mother. "I said the cocoa's cold," the boy replied. His parents were themselves speechless for a moment. Then the father asked, "Why, after all these years of silence, do you now suddenly say, 'The cocoa's cold'?" "Because," the boy said, "everything was all right until now."

To put it mildly, the cocoa of our world is cold. So what keeps so many of us silent? I will come back to this question later.

## **There is an underlying cause of poverty that hasn't been mentioned yet – fear.**

It is a fear we are rarely conscious of. We are fearful about the fragile nature of life. Impermanence. Inevitable mortality. Our very genes are programmed for survival at all costs. Yet death awaits us. This fear begets self-centered behavior, a natural response. So communal societies prioritized the life and survival of the group and taught this to community members. But in modern America, each person, each family, each ethnic group and class is on its own, or even pitted against each other – survival becomes individualized. So this primal fear begets selfishness. Selfishness begets accumulation. Accumulation begets alarm systems and gated communities, and unquenchable desire. The drive to accumulate begets greed.

In the U.S., accumulation, increasing consumption and continual growth requires global control, and our most effective tool is the multinational corporation. As Ani DiFranco says, "Any tool is a weapon if you hold it right." If needed, the model is backed by the most powerful and deadliest military machine ever assembled.

## **A fundamental flaw in our market system: creation of poverty.**

The economy has created great wealth and prosperity for some. But along with wealth, capitalism has always produced poverty and this, I hope you agree, is unacceptable. The flaws in our advanced market system continue to perpetuate poverty, so if we are going to stick with capitalism, the only acceptable option is transformation.

Extreme poverty, besides being tragically unjust, is unsustainable because desperation drives decisions – to exhaust limited farmland and cut down the last nearby trees.

Extreme affluence is even more destructive. Clear cutting, rampant fossil fuel use, resource depletion, exploitation of people's labor, over-consumption. Our economy depends on exploiting the environment and labor, and continual growth. The system *feeds* on ever more consumption. Consumer spending keeps the US and many other economies going – for now.

Recently, WBAI radio hosted some shamans from Asia, Africa and North America who talked about commonalities in their cosmology, specifically how the earth seeks balance at an elemental level. They spoke of how since the birth of the industrial age, the fire element has been in ascendance. The burning of coal and fossil fuel, steam and internal combustion

engines, and more and more consumption. What balances fire? You guessed it. The shamans agreed that the gradual rise of oceans, the floods and mudslides, and the terrible hurricanes are in response to fire out of balance. The earth heals itself, but not necessarily in ways we might want. What we can potentially do, *if* we listen to the earth, is to reduce the fire.

Okay, so the U.S. has defined its national interests primarily in terms of advancing the global reach of our multinational enterprises. Producers are not only free to source overseas, they are encouraged to do so. As assembly and manufacturing jobs are created in poorer countries, wages may increase in those countries, but wages in the U.S. go down. Real wages here have been in decline for most people over the past 3 and a half decades. (In Europe, new industries such as alternative energy may fill the gap, but this happens only with enlightened leadership and appropriate incentives. In the United States, we have neither, so wages stagnate *at the same time* that corporate profits soar.)

The divide between rich and poor widens. We have two nations. The capital of one could be Detroit, where 34% of the population live in poverty, including almost half the children.

San Francisco could be the capital of the other nation populated by people earning six digit salaries. Last year, for the first time, the top 20% of earners in the U.S. took in more than half the total income in the country. And the top **5%** own 70 percent of the financial wealth of the country.

But let us go back to the question: *What* keeps us silent? I have learned from a mentor of mine, Joanna Macy, that we can awaken more fully to the reality and the need for change if we truly feel the pain and grieve for the world – for the extinction of species, for grave injustices, for the pain of watching children starve to death.

Joanna Macy, a Buddhist prophet and healer, in her book *Coming Back to Life* talks about the many things that prevent us from taking pain in, and therefore prevent us from breaking through the pain, from breaking free. She writes of the psychological reasons we repress feeling pain for our world. All of them are based in fear. Two potent ones for me are Fear of Despair and Fear of Powerlessness.

Macy also talks about the societal sources of repression, such as mass media, job and time pressures, social violence and others. The consequences are many. I'll mention five of the eight Macy talks about:

- Fragmentation and alienation: we divide ourselves into the surface, functional me and the authentic self.
- Displacement activities: studies show that when rats are threatened, they perform frenzied, irrelevant activities. We seem to do the same.
- Blaming and scape-goating: Karl Jung called this projection of the shadow, and this is manifested in things like sexism or racism.
- Political passivity.
- Avoidance of painful information; with a typical escape into material comforts.

When we succumb to repression and cannot or will not take in reality and grieve for the pain of the world we pay a *tremendous* cost. Lost is the opportunity for coherence between what we know deep down and the reality that we deny. So we live out a sort of schizophrenic lie. Lost also is the opportunity to break free. To wake up.

What do we need in order to wake? And how do we create those conditions? Especially for those of us who are driven to save the world, a healthy dose of letting go can help us open up to the pain, to get past the fear. If the challenge is feeling too big, remember to let go to God, if you are religious. And all of us can relax a bit knowing that we don't have to do it alone – thousands and millions of other people are, amazingly, waking up and working for another world. We witnessed this in the massive peace protests before the U.S.'s illegal war in Iraq, and the huge Make Poverty History mobilizations this summer. There are signs all around us that people are waking up. (If you need some proof, read Anna and Frances Lappé's book "Hope's Edge" for some encouragement.)

Truly we are on the cusp of great shifts. But changing paradigms create great turmoil. A collapsing worldview is a social threat that is just as real as the physical threat of something like climate change. Our challenge is to *dream* and *venture* into a dramatic new paradigm of a just and sustainable society.

We must dream, and desire that world, and hone those desires into intentions. Intentions are what make us uniquely human. The intention to end hunger. The intention to work together to bring about a Life-sustaining Society. Indigenous peoples have called this period that we are entering, this collective intention the Great Turning.

### **There are three dimensions to the Great Turning.**

- 1) **Holding actions/actions to slow the damage:** these are the usual social change activism like boycotts, civil disobedience, and advocacy for things like food stamps and health coverage, but these must also include challenging power structures (demanding corporate accountability and abolishing corporate personhood; winning campaign finance reform, creating a WFTO – a World Fair Trade Organization to replace the WTO.)
- 2) **Analysis of structural causes and the creation of structural alternatives:** e.g. post-fossil fuel agriculture and urban planning; creation of self-reliant regional food economies.
- 3) **Shift in consciousness:** one example, God's Politics' author Jim Wallis and the Call to Renewal calls for a spiritual shift and actions to back it; a movement that entertains the idea that Jesus actually meant what he said: we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and set the captives free.

The shift emerges from a change in one's worldview, and also in our intention. You and I will create that other world that indeed is possible, if we do it out of **love**. We need to cultivate ourselves, our dreams, our intentions and love.

- Take time for relationships, for beauty, for rest, for gratitude.
- Learn from those who came before: spiritual teachers and our holy books. If you are lucky enough to find a living teacher or a mentor, thank the stars. Be open to that.
- And learn from the wisdom of life. Macy encourages us to act our age – to speak to decision-makers and to act with the full authority as a life form 4 billion years in the making.
- And choose or deepen your practice, a spiritual discipline to stay centered and connect with the divine, which has a wonderful way of keeping things in perspective.
- Find, nurture and be nourished by a community.

Acting out of love, together, we will make the changes needed to create the world as we envision it.