

Personal Reflections on the State of the World

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INTRODUCTION

Greetings, friends. It's wonderful, as always, to be here with all of you, and an honor to have been invited to share some thoughts with you.

The title of my talk ("**Personal Reflections on the State of the World**") was meant to be general enough to give me plenty of leeway to talk about almost anything, because, frankly, when I was asked what the title would be, I hadn't yet had much time to think about what I wanted to say. At this point, having given it more thought, I think I would at least amend the title by adding this subtitle: "**Randy's Ongoing Meditation on Fear.**" I think you'll see what I mean.

FIVE CRISES

But let me start with the state of the world and a brief recap of what appear to me to be 5 of the most serious, most threatening, most daunting crises we face – crises that many of us here have devoted significant portions of our lives attempting to address – *and few, if any, with more faithfulness, perseverance, and equanimity than the monks and nuns of Nipponzan Myohoji.*

First, the crisis of nuclear power.

This is from The Economist, of March 10, 2012 (one year after Fukushima): "*The triple meltdown at Fukushima was the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986. The damage extends far beyond a lost power station, a stricken operator (the Tokyo Electric Power Company, or TEPCO), and an intense debate about the future of the nation's nuclear power plants. It goes beyond the trillions of yen that will be needed for a decade-long effort to decommission the reactors and remove their wrecked cores, if indeed that proves possible, and the even greater sums that may be required for decontamination (which one [Tokyo University expert] thinks could cost as much as 50 trillion yen, or \$623 billion). It reaches into the lives of the displaced, and of those further afield who know they have been exposed to*

the fallout from the disaster....For parallels that do justice to the disaster, the Japanese find themselves reaching back to the second world war, otherwise seldom discussed....And, of course, to Hiroshima."

There are roughly [400-?] operating operating nuclear power plants in the world today. 104 of them are in the U.S., most of them old and approaching, or already having exceeded, their 40-year design life. Many of them, including the Vermont Yankee nuke, on the Conn. River 20 miles north of here and the Pilgrim nuke in Plymouth, 40 miles south of Boston, have been given permission by the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission to operate for an additional 20 years, and at 120% of the power output they were designed to produce. 23 of the U.S. reactors, including both Vermont Yankee and Pilgrim, are of almost the identical make and flawed design (courtesy of General Electric) as the nukes still melting down in Fukushima.

Then there's the problem of nuclear weapons, the alleged need for which gave birth to electricity-generating nuclear power plants as part of the so-called "peaceful atom" program. Despite limited disarmament efforts, there are still at least **23,000 nuclear weapons** in existence today, and in twice as many countries as before, during the first years of the nuclear arms race. And many of these weapons are on "high alert," which means they could be launched at a moment's notice.

Then there's the matter of the mining, milling, enrichment, and fabrication of fuel and components for both nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants--processes which have been poisoning generations of people, many of them living in indigenous communities in the U.S. and around the world, people who have the misfortune to live in or close to where these toxic operations take place. They, along with those who live near nuclear power plants, face ongoing exposure to radioactive contaminants that cause chronic and terminal conditions, such as cancer, thyroid and heart diseases, miscarriage, birth defects and genetic damage.

And, of course, there's the so-far totally unsolved problem of high-level radioactive waste, some of which must be safely stored for hundreds of thousands of years.

A great deal more could be said about this deadly problem, but in the interests of time I'll stop here and try to summarize the other four crises even more briefly.

Second, the crisis of American militarism (which includes at least for us Americans, as well as millions of

people around the world, the crisis of America's global empire).

Here are just a few pertinent facts:

--Currently, 47 cents of every discretionary federal tax dollar (excluding trust funds such as Social Security, which aren't paid for out of tax dollars) is used for military expenditures, including expenditures for our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (the total for which will soon reach a trillion dollars).

--The current U.S. military budget is approximately equal to the military budgets of every other country in the world combined.

--To help fight and prepare for its wars, the Pentagon hires more than 200,000 corporate contractors. During the past 10 years, six of those corporations, working in support of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, have landed contracts, many of them awarded without competitive bidding, totaling from \$5 billion to \$41 billion apiece.

--According to a Congressional commission, at least \$31 billion, and possibly as much as \$60 billion has been lost to contract waste and fraud in Iraq and Afghanistan alone.

--And according to Libertarian presidential candidate Ron Paul, the U.S. has 900 overseas military bases in 130 countries around the globe.

Third, the economic crisis (in no small part caused by our extravagant military spending)

--Approximately 50 million Americans are currently living in poverty.

--Despite the fact that the U.S. is supposed to be the richest country in the world, roughly 42% of our children live in or near poverty.

--Hunger is on the rise, affecting tens of millions of American families--to say nothing of the *hundreds* of millions of hungry children and adults worldwide.

--In the last 25 years, 82% of income growth in the U.S. has gone to the richest 1% of the population, and in the last 10 years, 100% has gone to the richest 1%.

--1% of the U.S. population now owns 41% of this country's wealth, and receives 25% of all income each year.

--In 1975, the ratio of average income for corporate CEO's to average income for workers was 24 to 1. Now it's 343 to 1.

Fourth, the "climate change" crisis

In his widely disseminated feature article, entitled "Reckoning," in the August 2012 issue of Rolling Stone magazine, Bill McKibben starts out by saying that for those who still aren't convinced about the reality of climate change, "*...here are some hard numbers....June broke or tied 3,215 high-temperature records across the United States. That followed the warmest May on record in the Northern Hemisphere—the 327th consecutive month in which the temperature of the entire globe exceeded the 20th-century average....Meteorologists reported that this spring was the warmest ever recorded for our nation, [constituting] 'the largest temperature departure from average of any season on record.'*"

That same week, McKibben tells us, "*Saudi authorities reported that it had rained in Mecca despite a temperature of 109 degrees, the hottest downpour in the planet's history.*"

Yet despite this evidence, McKibben writes "*...the leaders of the world's nations, 'meeting in Rio [de Janeiro] for the 20th anniversary of the massive 1992 environmental summit, accomplished nothing'*" [with our own country, despite the fact that we lead the world in consumption of resources and production of pollutants, deserving much, though certainly not all, the blame for this deplorable failure].

And that brings me, finally, to **the fifth crisis: the crisis of American democracy**

In a very recent op-ed entitled "Money in Politics: Where Is the Outrage?", Bill Moyers speaks of a "*...death rattle of American democracy brought on by an overdose of campaign cash.*"

Moyers goes on to say: "*A radical minority of the super-rich has gained ascendancy over politics, buying the policies, laws, tax breaks, subsidies, and rules that consolidate a permanent state of vast inequality by which they can further help themselves to America's wealth and resources.*"

"*We are nearing the culmination,*" he concludes, "*of a cunning and fanatical drive to dismantle the political*

institutions, the legal and statutory canons, and the intellectual and cultural frameworks that were slowly and painstakingly built over decades to protect everyday citizens from the excesses of private power. The ‘city on the hill’ has become a fortress of privilege, guarded by a hired political class and safely separated from the economic pressures that are upending the household stability, family dynamics, social mobility, and civic life of everyday Americans.”

FEAR

So where does all this self-destructive behavior come from—behavior that gives rise to these (and other) crises?

Asking this question always takes me back to something a man from India named Sunderlal Bahugana said to me sometime in the early to mid-‘80’s when I arranged for him to speak at UMass as a part of his American speaking tour.

Sunderlal, who, I gather, is still going strong at the age of 85, was, back then, already a well-known and much-revered disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who was leading a huge – it was said “the world’s largest”—grassroots, nonviolent, environmental movement, called the “*Chipko*” movement whose aim was to prevent the deforestation of large areas of the Himalayas and the destruction of the villages and people whose lives depended on the forest.

I found myself sitting next to Sunderlal at supper in the UMass campus center after his presentation. Tall, with a long white beard (even then) and dressed, as I recall, in a long white-ish robe (probably hand-spun, hand-woven “khadi), he was an imposing, awe-inspiring person. At one point during the meal, I asked him what he thought was the cause of the rampant deforestation that the Chipko movement was trying to stop. Sunderlal looked at me for a moment without saying a word, and then said, slowly and carefully, “*Fear and greed.*”

That was it. Nothing more. Needless to say, it wasn’t exactly the kind of answer I was expecting. After a pregnant pause during which I tried to think of a follow-up question, I finally said to him, putting on my organizer’s “hat,” “*If fear and greed are the cause, what can we do about it?*” This is what his answer was: “*We must start by learning to live without fear and greed ourselves.*” I could think of nothing more to say. Yet I’ve never forgotten what he said.

In recent times, I’ve found myself thinking about the “fear” part of Sunderlal’s reply, more than the “greed” part—for two reasons: First, I suspect that greed is largely a function of fear; that is, it seems to me that our desire to accumulate more and more money, possessions, fame, power, or whatever, is because we feel we need it to be more secure, our insecurity being, of course, a *form* a fear.

(Not that greed is a minor problem, of course. I can’t help but recall the famous words of Sitting Bull, the legendary Lakota Sioux Chief, who, reflecting on white people’s greed, our addiction to material things, is said to have remarked: “*The love of possessions is a disease with them.*” And indeed it is.)

The second reason I’ve spent considerable time of late musing about fear is due to an inspiring “*wisdom teaching*” passed on to us (and to the world) a few years ago by Penny Gill, a wonderful friend and neighbor to many here today. (Thank you, Penny.)

In thinking about the five crises I’ve just mentioned, it isn’t hard to see that fear is a major driver of countries’ quest for the illusory safety and security – and, for some, the feeling of power and prestige – that possession of nuclear weapons can provide. And our fear, or insecurity, also stokes our thirst, or greed, for more and more of the “things” that the allegedly abundant, “cheap” electricity from nuclear power plants can provide.

Similarly, isn’t it fear and it’s malignant offshoot, greed, ...

- that drives this country’s militarism, our addiction to war-making, weapons-building, and military spending?...
- that drives Wall Street moguls to manipulate the market for their own self gain, thus causing the recent economic collapse? and that drives some of us to knowingly participate in that fraud because we think we can gain from it?...
- that drives our rapacious exhaustion of the earth’s finite resources, and the pollution of the air, water, earth, forests and other creatures whose health we depend on?...
- and that corrupts our would-be democracy with the insidious notions that spending money on elections equals “free speech” and that corporations should have the same basis rights and protections as individual human beings?

We know that much of this fear is generated, or at least greatly exaggerated, by governments, institutions (often religious ones), corporate advertisers, and individual demagogues that deliberately try to frighten us (and often with considerable success!) in order to get us to do something they want us to do (like buy a product, support a war, or just keep silent about things we know are wrong).

Taking a step back, I ask myself, “Why are we such fearful creatures, or at least so susceptible to fear propagated by others?” Could it be due to a basic misunderstanding of who we are? Here’s what Albert Einstein once said about who, in fact, we are:

“A human being,” he said, “is part of the whole, called by us ‘universe,’ a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—an optical illusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us....”

Is the “prison” Einstein refers to...is it in some way a prison of fear? Is it our sense of separateness as individual human beings, unconnected to the whole, that causes us to fear that when push comes to shove, we’re really on our own, to fear that, despite all the pious platitudes, life is an inherently competitive, zero-sum game, and that others’ gain may be our loss, and that if we don’t look out for ourselves no one else will? I can’t help but feel that that is the case. If so, no wonder our world is in crisis.

So, what’s the nature of the fear we’re talking about, and what are its effects? As the “wisdom teaching” I referred to points out, there are two kinds of fear. The first is the kind that’s helpful, that’s necessary for our well-being, our self-preservation. This is the fear that instinctively and automatically kicks in when we we’re tempted to touch a hot stove, or when the river keeps rising and threatens to wash away our homes. I.e., a very realistic fear.

The second kind of fear is the fear we feel in response to a largely illusory, imagined situation or scenario that we’ve conjured up, one that has little or no basis in immediate reality. It seems to me that most of our fears are of this second kind, and they are definitely *not* helpful. On the contrary, they tend to be self-destructive, for ourselves, our culture, our society, our world. In speaking about “fear,” it’s this *second* kind of fear that I’m referring to.

So, what about the *effects* of fear – on our bodies, our minds, and our hearts? This layperson’s understanding is that fear automatically tightens us, constricts us, armors us,

and to some extent shuts us down – all of which can be useful with regard to the first kind of fear—that is, reality-based fear, when the danger we face is immediate and real.

But in the case of the second kind of fears, our non-immediate, not-reality-based fears – which count, I believe, for most of our fears – this tightening, constricting process makes it hard, if not impossible, for us think clearly and feel deeply. It tends to shut down our hearts as well as our minds, thus blocking or diminishing our innate capacity for empathy and compassion, our ability to be fully human, our ability to, as the monks of the Weston Priory put it, “*to see with the eyes of compassion, to hear with the ear of our hearts.*”

Loss or diminution of our innate capacity for compassion, for empathy, is probably the greatest toll fear takes. In a truly compassionate world, none of these crises I’ve mentioned would exist, because all of us would be immediately conscious of, and actually *feel*, the pain and suffering, or the threat of pain and suffering, that our fellow creatures, human and non-human are feeling. And we would immediately respond in order to prevent or alleviate that pain and suffering—in the same way a mother immediately responds to pain and suffering on the part of her child.

I love what Eudora Welty, the famous Southern novelist, once said in this regard. She said “*My continuing passion is to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s human plight.*”

And there’s Mother Teresa’s succinct way of putting it: “*The problem with the world is that we draw the circle of our family too small.*”

This same fear-induced process of constriction also takes a toll on our ability to see. It causes a kind of blindness, a loss of vision (both literally and metaphorically). And to quote the Book of Proverbs, “*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*” (By implication, might it also be true to say, “Where is too much fear, the people perish”? or, to put it in the affirmative, “Where there is no fear, the people flourish”?)

When fear causes us to focus obsessively and myopically on that which scares us, we don’t see, or we quickly lose sight of much else, including really important things that have the capacity to enrich and sustain us, especially during hard times. Two of the things I myself tend to lose

sight of are *beauty* and *goodness*. How often I fail to really take notice of the wondrous beauty all around me (for example, the flock of sparrows that suddenly appeared on the grass outside my window as I was composing this talk, or the milky, gauzy, ¾-moon that appeared over the tree-tops as I was heading off on a walk before bed).

And often I don't see, or soon forget, the goodness of others, whether it's all the positive, decent, caring, loving, constructive things that people all around me are doing for each other every day (comforting a sick friend, helping take care of a child, volunteering to clean up a local river), or the amazing, inspiring, and genuinely *hopeful* actions and initiatives that people and communities are taking, both locally and all around the world, in *response* to the crises we face.

Author, philosopher and Buddhist activist Joanna Macy has referred to this rapidly increasing activity as "*The Great Turning*." Here's what she has said about it:

"In the face of all the bad news, the challenge of creating a sustainable civilization can seem absurdly unrealistic. Yet it is germinating now, that sustainable society on which the future depends. Its seeds are sprouting in countless actions in defense of life, and in fresh perceptions of our mutual belonging in the living body of Earth—bold, new perceptions deriving from both science and spirituality. Although it doesn't feature in the day's headlines or evening news, a silent revolution is occurring, bringing unparalleled changes in the ways we see and think and relate."

Author, "green" entrepreneur, and environmental activist Paul Hawken describes this phenomenon as a rapidly growing "*movement*," that he says may be a kind of human "*immune system*." ... "*Picture*," he says, "*the collective presence of all human beings as an organism*" [which, I would add, in relation to Planet Earth as a whole, many scientists believe it is]. "*Pervading that organism are intelligent activities, humanity's immune response to resist and heal the effects of political corruption, economic disease and ecological degradation....*"

Hawken goes on to say that "*The incongruity of anarchists, wealthy philanthropists, street clowns, scientists, youthful activists, indigenous and native people, diplomats, computer geeks, writers, strategists, peasants and students all working toward common goals is a testament to human impulses that are unstoppable and eternal*."

The importance of keeping all this in our minds and hearts while we, at same time, try our best to address the seemingly overwhelming odds against successfully rescuing ourselves and our planet from the crises we face reminds me of something poet Jack Gilbert once wrote: "*We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.*"

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT OUR FEARS?

So, what can we do to eliminate or at least reduce our fears, starting, as Sunderlal Bahuguna counseled me almost 30 years ago, with ourselves? Actually, I'm not sure it's possible for most of us – or at least for me — to *totally* eliminate all our fears (though that's probably a worthy goal). For me, it's more a question of how I can *overcome* them – that is, lessen their potency, their hold on me -- so that I can act *in spite of* my fears.

All of us, I think – no matter how courageous we may seem at times -- carry inside us fears of some sort. Our wonderful departed friend and local legend, Wally Nelson -- who, with his partner Juanita, modeled for us, in so many ways, how to live principled lives --was one of the most courageous people I've ever known. Yet I can hear him saying, as he often did, "*I have LOTS of fear, all KINDS of fear.*"

And I, too, have lots of fears – and have had, ever since I was a small boy and woke up night after night with terrifying nightmares. And I've continued to have fears...for example, when I faced the prospect of prison because of my refusal to cooperate with the Vietnam war...and, later, the prospect of losing our family's home to the federal government due to Betsy's and my war tax resistance. Both instances put a great deal of fear in me...though, fortunately, not enough to prevent me from doing what my conscience was telling me I had to do.

I also have all sorts of more mundane fears, just like most people – fear of failure, fear of losing the affection and respect of others, fear of inciting, by my actions, others' dislike, enmity, or even violence, and, increasingly as I get older, fear of destitution, of not being able to take care of my family, of serious illness, incapacitation, and, at times, I suppose, of death.

Sound familiar? So how can we constructively *deal* with our fears so that they don't prevent us from exercising our capacities for empathy, and compassion, and courageous action?

I think the first step, certainly for me, is simply to recognize that I *have* fears, to get in touch with them, to allow myself to experience the feeling of them – rather than cover them over or repress them as soon as they crop up and thus pretend to myself that I’m fear-less. As Alice Walker put it in a recent interview, “*You have to go to the places that scare you so you can see: what do really believe? Who are you really?*” Sitting quietly, as in meditation, is one way that helps me do that. Constant busyness and distraction make it impossible for me to do it.

In addition, I often remember something Gandhi once said that helps me put my fears in perspective. He said (and this is only a rough paraphrase) that *we should never give up something until we reach a point where we want something else more*. Which I translate to mean that I will only be able to overcome my fear of, let’s say, losing something (my reputation, my health, my physical safety, my possessions) when I can open up to, get in touch with, something else that I want, or value, much *more* than what I risk losing.

In Wally’s case, what he frequently talked about and seemed to value most of all was “*freedom*,” being able to feel like a free man, unconstrained by any kind of threat, risk, or danger—a person who’s able to follow his conscience and maintain his integrity under the most trying circumstances, without being held back by his fear of the consequences. I have no doubt that that’s what was most important to him. And that’s how he *lived*.

NONVIOLENT ACTION

The purpose of reducing or overcoming our fears is, of course, to be able to *act*, to avoid being frozen into passivity because of what we’re afraid of. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has emphatically pointed out, compassion serves little or no purpose if not followed by action, *nonviolent* action, on behalf of others.

For me, nonviolent action (or “active nonviolence,” as I prefer to call it) means at least two things: to put it in the words of the biblical injunction, it means that we must “*Do good and resist evil*.” Gandhi, in describing his program of “*Satyagraha*,” elaborated on this formulation by speaking of “doing good” in terms of creating, or offering, positive, living *alternatives* to all that we oppose, including social, political, and, especially, economic alternatives. And he spoke of “resisting evil” as not just protesting what we know is wrong, but actively *refusing to cooperate* with it, regardless of the risk to ourselves.

COMMUNITY

As we all know, this is no easy prescription to follow (or, in the words of that great Civil Rights song, there’s “*no easy road to freedom*”)—if only because it’s so easy for our fears to get in the way: our fears of losing all sorts of things that we’ve come to feel are important to us, that we’ve become attached to (our jobs, our social status, our possessions, our financial nest-eggs, etc.) For this reason, there’s no better source of mutual inspiration and support than *community*—not to mention no better way to accomplish something significant than by working cooperatively with others, in community.

Last March, in commemoration of the one-year anniversary of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, our Japanese friend Chiho Kaneko, a resident of Vermont who’d just returned from visiting the Fukushima area, spoke passionately and very movingly to a packed Brattleboro audience about what she’d just witnessed and heard of the agonizing fear, anxiety, and suffering on the part of the people living in the Fukushima area – the mothers, the fathers, the children...the workers, the farmers, the school teachers, and many others.

In closing her talk, Chiho looked out at all of us and said: “*I would like to believe that the soundness of our community is our collective priority, because being part of a healthy and intact community is crucial for our survival in this ever-changing world.... It is our only hope.*”

CLOSING QUESTION

I’d like to end *this* talk by inviting you to join me in pondering the following question:

Could there be such a thing as a “Fear Liberation Campaign” – that is, a campaign whose principal purpose would be to enable us to begin liberating ourselves and each other from our fears – those fears that hold us back from taking bold steps to do whatever it is our hearts call us to do in the service of “the Great Turning” ?

And if so, what would such a campaign *look* like? What would it *do*?

And, might such a campaign begin *here*, in *our* community, here in this rich and beautiful Valley we call home?....

Thank you.