

WHY I AM A SOCIALIST

Reverend Bill Breedon

Unitarian Universalist Church

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(Note: This is the manuscript and not a *verbatim* copy of the sermon as it was presented, but is a close facsimile thereof. A few portions of the text were omitted during the oral presentation due to time constraints, and of course there are always impromptu remarks for which I am willing to be held responsible, but I don't remember what they were.)

Let me begin with the following disclaimer. I am neither an economist nor a scientist, which may lead one to ask, "How does one know one is a socialist if one is neither an economist nor a scientist? Does not economics constitute a science?" Indeed Webster defines economics as the "science that deals with the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth, and with the various related problems of labor, finance, taxation, etc."

Well, let me begin with a quote from someone who had at least half of the requisite professions, that of a scientist, Albert Einstein

whose essay entitled *Why Socialism?* was originally published in the first issue of *Monthly Review* (May 1949).

“Is it advisable for one who is not an expert on economic and social issues to express views on the subject of socialism? I believe for a number of reasons that it is.

Let us first consider the question from the point of view of scientific knowledge. It might appear that there are no essential methodological differences between astronomy and economics: scientists in both fields attempt to discover laws of general acceptability for a circumscribed group of phenomena in order to make the interconnection of these phenomena as clearly understandable as possible.” (Einstein, *Why Socialism*, *Monthly Review*, 1949)

If I may be so audacious as to interrupt Einstein, I simply must interject that in my humble opinion, there has been little recent attempt in economics to “make the interconnection of these phenomena as clearly understandable as possible.” I used to listen to the congressional testimony of Alan Greenspan, and I witnessed no such attempt. His answers were even foggier than the rambling novels of his oracle Ayn Rand. One occasionally has to point out that Rand’s works were not economic textbooks, but rather utopian novels, and, in my opinion, poorly written ones at that.

I encourage those who interested to read Raj Patel’s book, *The Value of Nothing* which provides an exposé of the way Ayn Rand’s

cultic worship of selfishness has come to dominate present day economics and the policy agenda of powerful nations.

Back to Einstein who suggests that there are essential methodological differences between economics and other sciences.

“But in reality such methodological differences do exist. The discovery of general laws in the field of economics is made difficult by the circumstance that observed economic phenomena are often affected by many factors which are very hard to evaluate separately. In addition, the experience which has accumulated since the beginning of the so-called civilized period of human history has—as is well known—been largely influenced and limited by causes which are by no means exclusively economic in nature. For example, most of the major states of history owed their existence to conquest. The conquering peoples established themselves, legally and economically, as the privileged class of the conquered country. They seized for themselves a monopoly of the land ownership and appointed a priesthood from among their own ranks. The priests, in control of education, made the class division of society into a permanent institution and created a system of values by which the people were thenceforth, to a large extent unconsciously, guided in their social behavior.

“But historic tradition is, so to speak, of yesterday; nowhere have we really overcome what Thorstein Veblen called "the predatory phase" of human development. The observable economic facts belong to that phase and even such laws as we can derive from them are not applicable to other phases. **Since the real purpose of socialism is precisely to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development, economic science in its present state**

can throw little light on the socialist society of the future.
(emphasis mine)

“Second, socialism is directed towards a social-ethical end. Science, however, cannot create ends and, even less, instill them in human beings; science, at most, can supply the means by which to attain certain ends. But the ends themselves are conceived by personalities with lofty ethical ideals and—if these ends are not stillborn, but vital and vigorous—are adopted and carried forward by those many human beings who, half unconsciously, determine the slow evolution of society.

“For these reasons, we should be on our guard not to overestimate science and scientific methods when it is a question of human problems; and we should not assume that experts are the only ones who have a right to express themselves on questions affecting the organization of society.” (Ibid.)

Well, being not an expert, yet given the blessing of Einstein, I now feel empowered to continue.

To answer the question, “Why I am a Socialist?” one has to consider my past. I surely wasn’t born a socialist. Although my mother was a member of the United Rubber Workers Union, by the 1960’s the major unions had been pretty much assimilated into the hierarchy of capitalism, the communists and socialist having been exported or driven underground.

My path to socialism is littered with the words of my heroes, most of whom strangely enough were socialists. My first encounter with the

writing of a socialist was purely accidental, and it was not until much later that I learned what socialism actually meant. In the small library which served all twelve grades at the school in Odon, Indiana, I spied a book entitled *In Dubious Battle*. I was in the seventh grade, and I am not sure I even knew what the word “dubious” meant, but I knew what a battle was. I was enamored by stories of war, with three older brothers in the military, one of them on an aircraft carrier heading for the waters off Vietnam. When I approached the desk to check it out, the librarian said, “Well, this is a pretty mature book, but you can try it if you want.” I will be forever grateful that she didn’t discourage me from reading it.”

Steinbeck introduced me to battles not fought with tanks and airplanes, but rather with words, pens and ideas. The maturation of those seeds would take years, but when I pause to look back, I see the words of Eugene V. Debs, “Where ever there is a lower class I am in it, wherever there is a criminal element I am a part of it, and as long as one soul rots in prison, I am not free.” I see the lives of Susan B. Anthony, Hellen Keller, Kurt Vonnegut, Howard Zinn and many others who have informed my thinking, inspired my spirit and prodded me to join in the battle for justice and equality for all.

Actually, the subject of Reverend Leite’s children’s story about the Sermon on the Mount might well be seen as the first influence that unconsciously channeled my thinking into socialist waters. It surely must be among the greatest ironies of history that the teachings of that

preacher, that prophet of Judea, that Prince of Peace, have in our time been wedded to the most militant expressions of capitalism. Of course it has also been wedded to the most militant expressions feudalism, totalitarianism, fascism and nationalism. All “Isms” have a tendency to go militant on us don’t they? Indeed the history of institutional socialism so-called is drenched with the blood of the oppressed as well.

Why am I a socialist? I am a socialist because I believe that we should do all that is humanly possible to assure that every person on this planet be assured an equal inheritance of a sustainable life, and because I believe that there must be a better way to distribute the wealth of this planet, than the present model which has over the past five or six decades exponentially increased the gap between the rich and the poor.

I am a socialist because I believe that all persons have an inalienable right to participate in process of the allocation of resources, and in the creation of the collective will of the community through the democratic process. I do not expect a conflict free community, but rather a community willing to open the way for all to participate in the creation of a more just society.

I am a socialist because I believe that individuals find meaning and realize their greatest potential in community rather than as isolated individual consumers. I believe that markets must be deployed in the service of the common good, rather than persons being deployed and

destroyed in the service of the market. I believe we must become active citizens rather than addicted consumers.

Again, let us return to Einstein, and remember this was written in 1949.

“Innumerable voices have been asserting for some time now that human society is passing through a crisis, that its stability has been gravely shattered. It is characteristic of such a situation that individuals feel indifferent or even hostile toward the group, small or large, to which they belong. In order to illustrate my meaning, let me record here a personal experience. I recently discussed with an intelligent and well-disposed man the threat of another war, which in my opinion would seriously endanger the existence of mankind, and I remarked that only a supra-national organization would offer protection from that danger. Thereupon my visitor, very calmly and coolly, said to me: "Why are you so deeply opposed to the disappearance of the human race?"

“I am sure that as little as a century ago no one would have so lightly made a statement of this kind. It is the statement of a man who has striven in vain to attain an equilibrium within himself and has more or less lost hope of succeeding. It is the expression of a painful solitude and isolation from which so many people are suffering in these days. What is the cause? Is there a way out?” (Ibid.)

Einstein continues at the close of the article:

“I have now reached the point where I may indicate briefly what to me constitutes the essence of the crisis of our time. It

concerns the relationship of the individual to society. The individual has become more conscious than ever of his dependence upon society. But he does not experience this dependence as a positive asset, as an organic tie, as a protective force, but rather as a threat to his natural rights, or even to his economic existence. Moreover, his position in society is such that the egotistical drives of his make-up are constantly being accentuated, while his social drives, which are by nature weaker, progressively deteriorate. All human beings, whatever their position in society, are suffering from this process of deterioration. Unknowingly prisoners of their own egotism, they feel insecure, lonely, and deprived of the naive, simple, and unsophisticated enjoyment of life. Man can find meaning in life, short and perilous as it is, only through devoting himself to society.” (Ibid.)

I recommend the reading of this article in its entirety. Although the language is dated in terms of inclusiveness, the message is as relevant today as when it was first written.

I am a socialist because I believe that human beings are essentially social beings capable of rising above the existential predatory phase of our nature. I believe that we have the power to be a determinant in the evolution of that nature. I believe it because history is replete with examples of lives lived for others, and I believe that such lives constitute the force by which the arc of history is bent toward justice.

The meaning of a word is transformed by historical currents and changing realities. Socialism is strictly defined as “any of various theories of the ownership and operation of the means of productions and

distribution by society or the community rather than by private individuals, with all members of the society or the community sharing in the work and the products.” The realization of those various theories have yet to find perfection, and indeed distortions thereof have resulted in totalitarian regimes the likes of which no one of moral sensibilities desires to see repeated.

Capitalism is strictly defined by Webster as “The economic system in which all or most of the means of production and distribution, as land, factories, railroads, etc. are privately owned and operated for profit, originally under fully competitive conditions: it has been characterized by a tendency toward concentration of wealth, and in its later phase, by the growth of great corporations, increased governmental control, etc.”

We are certainly in the later phase, with governmental control a fluctuating factor in our economy, and corporations increasingly gaining more power. Multi-national corporations now outstrip national governments ability to control them. Historically, it seems to me that our nation prospered most when corporations were less powerful, unions were strong and government forced to be more attentive to its role as protector of the people. Our progress as a nation is the result of a constant tension between capitalist and socialist ideas.

Of late socialism has been written off as either an unworkable, defeated philosophy belonging to the waste bin of history, or as the

epitome of evil and the platform of Barack Obama. It surely cannot be both, and in my estimation, it is neither.

With regard to its defeat, I believe the truth is that it has never been tried. And with regard to the victory of Capitalism, usually marked by the rubble of the Berlin Wall, I am reminded of the words of Pyrrhus, the Mollosian King whose life bordered the 3rd and 4th centuries b.c.e. He defeated the Romans at Asculum in Apulia in 279 bce, but at such heavy losses that he declared, “One more such victory and I am lost.”

I am a socialist because I believe in a countervailing force against the ravages of an unfettered capitalism without a moral foundation. I find it interesting that Adam Smith was a professor of moral philosophy, and as such considered the moral implications of his economic theory. He warned against a market without morality, predicting that such a market would consume all other elements of the economy. In other words, such a market would give rise to economic fascism, an ends-justification-of-means philosophy of dog-eat-dog, humanity-stuck-in-the-predatory-phase of our evolution.

Mussolini said that fascism should more properly be called corporatism, in that it is the marriage between the corporation and the state. I think the consummation of that marriage was evident in the Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, which was simply a logical progression in the elevation of

the corporation to the status of personhood, and money to that of free speech. And I believe that logical progression will lead to the destruction of democracy.

I am a socialist in that I believe that there are some elements of our economy that should be removed from the profit sector and placed in the commons. I believe that healthcare should be non-profit and acknowledged as a human right for every person. I simply refuse to believe that we cannot provide basic health care to all of our citizens.

I believe that every person willing to work should be guaranteed a living wage, and by a living wage I mean a wage that does not require both parents of our children to work fulltime just to meet the minimum needs of survival. We need to structure our economy in way that enhances families rather than destroys them. We need an economy that provides full employment rather than using unemployment as a pressure valve, and a means to destroy the solidarity of the working class.

I also believe that we should have a maximum wage. Surely there must be a way to determine a reasonable maximum value of an individual's labor, and it surely will not compute to be tens of thousands of dollars an hour, while any mother's child dies of hunger on this planet.

I am a socialist in that I believe in the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all people, and I believe that the recognition of our

common humanity rather than our radical individuality is the starting point of building a more just society.

It is a sign of our arrogance in America that we pay no attention to examples of democratic socialism such as the intriguing model provided by the Brazilian Workers Party in the experiment of a participatory budget in Porto Alegre. There are new experiments of participatory democratic planning being tried in South America, and even in the United States with worker ownership of some factories, and they are ignored by the media. Any attempt to develop a system of mass democratic planning will be messy and will stumble, but I would submit that our current global situation calls for change.

Robert Heilbroner wrote the following in 1972:

“Our age has encountered with shocking force the problems inherent in two processes of world history—on the one hand, the cumulative addition to our technological capabilities; on the other, the relatively unchanged level of our social and political capabilities. We have to face, to a degree never before experienced in history, a wholly unequal contest between our ability to control the physical environment and thus to alter the setting of society, and our inability to control the political and social repercussions to which these environmental changes give rise.

“Before this juggernaut, socialism as well as capitalism have found themselves virtually helpless. How to humanize production on a vast scale; how to organize enormous networks of collective effort without equally enormous

networks of bureaucratic controls; how to spur incentive with catering to greed; how to adduce political participation without manipulation—these are problems that confront every advanced society and that have found solutions in none.”—Legacy of Decent p.64

Of course, forty years later we have discovered that our supposed ability to control the physical environment has turned out to be an illusion, thus making many of the old capitalist/socialist arguments irrelevant. Our planet certainly cannot endure another century of predatory capitalism such as the one just past; perhaps not even another decade. I believe we have now reached the point in human history where we will either discover the value of global community, or we will destroy the possibility of any community. It is no longer a matter of us or them; it is a matter of us.

I am a socialist in that I believe that cooperation is a better model than competition, and I believe that our economy and our marketplace must be transformed to focus on need rather than greed. We must invest in communities rather than banks. In the past three decades the number of homeless has skyrocketed as have the number of millionaires. I do not support an economic system that provides hovels for the poor and mansions for the rich. We need a rebirth of compassion and solidarity.

Listen to the wisdom of this piece, a gift of the Buddhists which hangs on my office wall:

The Paradox of Our Age

We have bigger houses but smaller families;
more conveniences, but less time.

We have more degrees but less sense;
more knowledge but less judgment;
more experts, but more problems;
more medicines but less healthiness.

We've been all the way to the moon and back,
but have trouble in crossing the street to meet our new neighbour.

We built more computers to hold more copies than ever,
But have less real communication;
We have become long on quantity,
but short on quality.

These are times of fast foods but slow digestion;
Tall men but short characters;
Steep profits but shallow relationships.

It's a time when there is much in the window
But nothing in the room. — the 14th Dalai Lama.

The United States today presents to the world much in the window, but there is nothing in the room.

Finally, I want to close this morning with the words of one of my greatest fictional heroes created by that first socialist I encountered John Steinbeck. It is a conversation between Tom and Ma Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Tom Joad: I been thinking about us, too, about our people living like pigs and good rich land layin' fallow. Or maybe one guy with a million acres and a hundred thousand farmers starvin'. And I been wonderin' if all our folks got together and yelled...

Ma Joad: Oh, Tommy, they'd drag you out and cut you down just like they done to Casy.

Tom Joad: They'd drag me anyways. Sooner or later they'd get me for one thing if not for another. Until then...

Ma Joad: Tommy, you're not aimin' to kill nobody.

Tom Joad: No, Ma, not that. That ain't it. It's just, well as long as I'm an outlaw anyways... maybe I can do somethin'... maybe I can just find out somethin', just scrounge around and maybe find out what it is that's wrong and see if they ain't somethin' that can be done about it. I ain't thought it out all clear, Ma. I can't. I don't know enough.

Ma Joad: How am I gonna know about ya, Tommy? Why they could kill ya and I'd never know. They could hurt ya. How am I gonna know?

Tom Joad: Well, maybe it's like Casy says. A fellow ain't got a soul of his own, just little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, then...

Ma Joad: Then what, Tom?

Tom Joad: Then it don't matter. I'll be all around in the dark - I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight, so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they

know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build - I'll be there, too.

Ma Joad: I don't understand it, Tom.

Tom Joad: Me, neither, Ma, but - just somethin' I been thinkin' about.

I believe that the day will come when we will be called to be there too. We will be called to walk for those who have no shoes, speak for those who have no voice and stand in solidarity with those who have been left on the side of the road. I pray for the wisdom to recognize that day, and for the courage to be there when it comes. Just somethin' I been thinkin' about.