

Gandhian Economics and the Yuletide

On Friday we celebrated the Winter Solstice of 2012. That puts us two days into the 14th Baktun of the Mayan Calendar. Another long count has begun and so I am very thankful to see you all here today! The world didn't end, the mysterious planet Nibiru did not collide with the Earth, and there was no reversal of magnetic polarity that caused us all to spin off into space. Hallalelujah!

The Solstice is a turning point. For Mayans, for Christians, for Pagans, for many religions and cultures, it is an ending and a beginning, a moment of rebirth that is a time for both celebration and reflection. This year, in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, I have been reflecting a lot on the fragility of the complex systems we depend on to provide us with energy, food, shelter, transportation, and information. Our economy depends on global supply chains that work with amazing efficiency when all parts of the chain are working. For those with money, no food is ever out of season, no

material desire is out of reach. Just-in-time sourcing means we don't need local resources or even warehouses. The global economy will fulfill all of our wants and needs with low-cost labor and always low prices. Until it doesn't. Until the machinery of globalization frays and breaks down in the face of economic absurdities and the limitations of Mother Nature.

In many traditions in the northern hemisphere, the Winter Solstice marks the beginning of a brief season of abundance between times of fasting and hardship. In the Christian tradition it is the time between Advent and Lent when we slaughter the animals that won't make it through a long winter. We enjoy a fine celebration with fresh meat and the remnants of the harvest. From midwinter until spring our ancestors struggled through the starving time, the long Lent before the earth once again offered up its bounty.

Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Katrina, and dustbowl like droughts in the Midwest remind us that Mother Earth has limits and

we need to fashion an economy that respects those limits. In thinking about that new economy, I look to the writings of one of my favorite economists, Mohandas Gandhi.

Gandhi is most often thought of as a prophet of non-violence, as a leader in the struggle against British colonialism and as the father of modern India. He was all of that. But he was also someone who thought everyday about how to create a sustainable economy. He did more than think about it. He tried really hard to live out his beliefs and offer models of sustainability in a series of communes or ashrams. When he was not in prison, Gandhi spent most of his adult life in these communities where he experimented with economic principles that would lift people out of poverty and create a sustainable and just local economy.

Now we may not think of someone who lived a somewhat eccentric life in a series of ashrams as a guide to navigating a 21st Century economy. But Gandhi's communities were experimental laboratories, places where he could test out theories, and modify

those theories based on the evidence and feedback he garnered from real life. He lived in a moment of transition as his country moved from colonialism to independence.

Gandhi's transformation from a supporter of the British Empire to one of its fiercest critics begins in South Africa, and the critique he develops is both political and economic. An early influence on Gandhi is the writing of the utopian socialist John Ruskin, specifically his book *Unto the Last*. Gandhi encounters this book in 1904 and immediately decides to take the book's principles to heart. He translates the book into his native language, Gujarati, and gives it the title: Sarvodaya: the upliftment of all or the welfare of all. He would later use that same word for a movement for economic justice for the rural poor in India. Inspired by the writings of Ruskin as well as Tolstoy, Emerson and Thoreau, he founds his first community, the Phoenix Community where everyone will engage in study, manual labor and all will receive the same living wage for their efforts. The Phoenix Community is also where he locates *Indian*

Opinion, a weekly journal published in English and three Indian languages. While Gandhi endeavors to participate in the life of the Phoenix Community he is also managing a law practice in Durban and raising his family. Gandhi would more fully commit to collective living and develop his economic philosophy at his next community, Tolstoy Farm.

Gandhi was an ardent admirer of Tolstoy's writings, especially his book *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. In that work Tolstoy laid out his vision for community grounded in the principles of nonviolence and the teachings of Jesus. Through the writings of Tolstoy, Gandhi also became familiar with the writing of Adin Ballou, an American abolitionist and pacifist, and a cousin of Hosea Ballou who we learned about last week.

Tolstoy Farm was born of necessity. Gandhi was waging a campaign against the pass laws in South Africa. Many of those engaged in this resistance were being jailed or deported or fired from their jobs and evicted from company housing. Gandhi needed

a way to support the resisters or Satyagrahis and their families.

Herman Kallenbach, a close and intimate friend of Gandhi during this period of his life, provided the solution with a donation of an 1100-acre farm outside of Johannesburg. This land, plus donations he received from supporters in India and England, offered a way to sustain the movement in body and soul.

Kallenbach, a wealthy architect, supervised the construction of residential buildings, a schoolhouse, and workshops for carpentry and shoemaking. The labor was provided by the satyagrahis.

Gandhi drew some of his ideas for organizing the community from a Trappist monastery near Durbin called Marianhill. The monks supported themselves by growing most of their own food. They earned currency for their needs beyond food by making and selling sandals. Gandhi sent Kallenbach, a secular Jew, to live at the monastery and learn the craft. Kallenbach in turn taught Gandhi who taught others at the farm. Soon they were turning out enough

sandals for their own needs and selling the surplus. Gandhi even sent a pair to Jan Smuts, the South African president.

Gandhi himself had visited the monastery back in 1895 and his granddaughter Ela Gandhi says it made a deep impression on him. For one thing, the monastery was racially integrated. All of the monks performed the same tasks: laboring in the fields, sweeping the grounds, cleaning the toilets, making sandals. And yet there was ample time for study and prayer. They all wore the same clothing and dined together on the same simple vegetarian fare. His granddaughter says this visit marked a radical change in Gandhi. In photos before 1895, we see a lawyer sharply dressed in high Victorian style. After 1895 Gandhi gradually changes to simpler dress.

In the daily life at Tolstoy Farm, one can see Gandhi modeling some elements of Marianhill. A reporter for a Johannesburg newspaper described the daily schedule: The bell rang at six in the morning. After the toilets were completed and the beds made, the

residents ate breakfast. Everybody was assigned a task for the morning. Work was stopped at 11 a.m. to go for a bath - the bath was postponed for this hour so as to make good use of the warm sun rays. The midday meal was served. At 1 p.m. Several classes of school began lasting until 5 late in the afternoon. The evening meal was taken at 5.30. There would be an hour of rest. At 7 p.m. the residents would assemble before Gandhi who would review the day's events, point out difficulties if any, and suggest ways of preventing their recurrence. The meeting ended with readings from books on religion and the singing of hymns.

So about four hours a day of manual labor and five hours a day of study. The children learned to read and write while the adults learned the ABCs of nonviolent resistance. Rounded out with three home-cooked, organic, locally grown vegetarian meals, community discussion, and ending the day with ecumenical prayers and spiritual reflection. It sounds like a UU summercamp!

Now I can see some of you are worried that I am going to tell you that Gandhian economics involves moving into an ashram or a monastery, spinning your own clothes, making sandals and working in the field. No. Gandhi crafted his economic theories to meet the specific needs of the masses of India who lived in rural villages.

Gandhi never imagined Tolstoy Farm or his later ashrams in India as the solution for economic inequality for the masses. The ashram was a refuge and a training ground for his satyagrahis, his seekers of truth and nonviolence, the cadre. It was also a laboratory for experimentation in a just economics. Gandhi had a remarkable confidence that India would achieve swaraj, self-rule. One day the British would pack up and leave and India would achieve independence and self-governance. And then what? Many of us active in politics don't always plan for that. We focus on immediate goals, getting this person elected or that bill passed. And then what?

Don't get me wrong; overthrowing nearly a century of colonial rule was a huge deal, and a necessary condition for laying the foundation for economic justice. A necessary but insufficient condition. What is truly remarkable about Gandhi is that he thought about what to do beyond the achievement of swaraj. And he began thinking about it more than fifty years before the British left India.

So what is Gandhian economics? Credit for coining the term is given to Gandhi's disciple, J. C. Kumarappa. Kumarappa studied economics in both India and the United States, earning graduate degrees from Syracuse and Columbia. Kumarappa was a Christian and worked to synthesize Gandhian teachings with basic Christian precepts. He was critical of Nehru's rush to industrialize India and especially the environmental costs of industrial agriculture.

Kumarappa was a leader of the Sarvodaya Movement inspired by Gandhi that sought to bring economic justice to the rural poor in India. Kumarappa is sometimes called the Green Gandhian and the father of the environmental movement in India.

E.F. Schumacher is perhaps the best known Western economist who gave serious consideration to Gandhian thought as he worked out his alternative to traditional economic theory in his book *Small is Beautiful*. Schumacher called Gandhi a “People’s Economist” and frequently gave lectures about the relevance of Gandhi’s economic teachings.

The economist Romesh Diwan, who taught at Rennsselaer Polytechnic Institute, describes six essential elements of Gandhian economics.

The first element, and I think this is the last Hindi word I will inflict on you for today, is Swadeshi. Basically, in Gandhian usage, it means self-sufficiency and localism. It is a term most associated with the economic boycott of British textiles and the encouragement by Gandhi to wear kadhi cloth, a locally produced cotton cloth. That is why Gandhi spun cloth everyday. It was an act of resistance against colonial economics that bought Indian cotton cheap and sold it back to them as expensive textiles produced in English mills.

Swadeshi says that local economies need skilled labor and manufacturing. Countries and localities that just depend on the export of raw materials will always be impoverished and exploited.

The second element is Bread Labour. Self reliance requires that one be able to support oneself and one's family through one's own labour. For this to be possible there must be opportunity for all to work and earn a living wage.

The third element is non-possession. In Gandhi's view we should not possess anything beyond our needs. We need food and clothing and shelter and tools to perform our work. Anything beyond that, Gandhi deemed excessive. Gandhi believed that the quest to own things beyond our needs often led us to violence. So material simplicity was necessary to achieve nonviolence.

The fourth element is Trusteeship. This flows from non-possession. We should view the things we possess as in trust for the benefit of others. Not only our material goods, but also our capabilities, skills, and natural gifts. We owe it to others to share

our gifts. Trusteeship especially applies to real property and natural resources. We are stewards of the earth and must live on the land lightly, knowing that we hold it in trust for future generations.

The fifth element is non-exploitation. Any economic activities that involve exploitation of others involve violence. We must pay fair wages and fair prices for the goods and services we consume and reject support of economic institutions that exploit others.

The final element is equality. Much of the economic violence that Gandhi witnessed in his life flowed from institutionalized inequality, buttressed by law, religion and custom. The brutal inequality of colonialism and the caste system. Gandhi rejected these systems completely and repeatedly risked his life and liberty in doing so.

In short, Gandhian economics entails just relationships, fairness, respect for the planet and a rejection of the rapacious materialism that is central to capitalism.

But is any of this relevant today? Is Gandhian economics just another utopian socialist fantasy that can't work beyond the sterile laboratory conditions of the ashram? Gandhi's life was cut short at the beginning of the free Indian nation, so we don't know what more he could have done to mold the direction of the new India. Nehru had a different economic philosophy, but adherents of Gandhi's economic teaching remain in pockets around the world. In India to be sure, but also around the world in worker cooperatives, from the neighborhood food co-op to the 84,000 workers employed at the worker-owned cooperatives in Mondragon, Spain. In credit unions and community supported agriculture. In environmental movements that take seriously Gandhi's call to trusteeship of the land. In the fight to stop fracking and movements to wean ourselves from fossil fuels. The environmental writer Bill McKibben tells us that of all the identified fossil fuels reserves that are currently in the ground, all of the known coal, gas and oil reserves, we can't burn more than 1/5

of those reserves without catastrophic changes to our planet. Burn just 1/5 of the fossil fuel that we know exists below our feet, and we will raise the temperature of the planet by 2 degrees Celsius.

Transformation to a new economy is not just a nice warm fuzzy idea, it is an urgent necessity.

A few weeks ago, Angela, in speaking about the approach of the end of the Mayan calendar, said there are three ways to view what might happen. The world might come to an end. Or it might not and it will just be another day on the calendar. The third possibility is that we could view this Winter Solstice as the dawn of a new age.

I like that third way. Let's view this Solstice, this Yuletide, as the end of an era of exploitation and the beginning of a new era, where, in the words that our President spoke four years ago, we will look back and say this was the moment when "the rise of the oceans began to slow and the planet began to heal." That moment has not yet happened but we need to make it happen. I know we

have the power to make it happen. It doesn't require a magical alignment of the planets, or stars or galaxies. It requires only us. As Tolstoy said, the Kingdom of God is within you. Within me, within us all.

We have the capacity within us to make that turning. The writer David Korton, a Stroudsburg native, calls this moment the Great Turning. He writes: "The old economy of greed and dominion is dying. A new economy of life and partnership is struggling to be born. The outcome is ours to choose." We need teachers and prophets to guide us in that choice, and for me, Gandhi is a good bet to get us moving in the right direction.

As Gandhi crafted economic models for rural India, we must craft a just economics for the 21st Century. In many areas we still have far to go. The last few decades have seen growing inequality, especially in the United States. The ultimate test, for Gandhi, of any action or effort, is how it affects the poorest among us. I will leave you with the words of the Mahatma:

“Whenever you are in doubt, or when self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to that person. Will that person gain anything by it? Will it restore that person’s control over his or her own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and starving millions? Then you will find doubts and self melting away.”