

# “Last Sunday” lectures

Robert Jensen

## Digging in and digging deep

[Remarks to the first in a series of “Last Sunday” community gatherings in Austin, TX, November 26, 2006.]

We billed Last Sunday as a place for people to come together to explore the intersections of the political, artistic, and spiritual. The idea came out of conversations among friends: Eliza Gilkyson, a singer/songwriter with interests in politics and spirituality; Jim Rigby, a minister who has a knack for stirring up trouble, theologically and politically; and me, a professor involved in a variety of political groups.

There are lots of organizations and movements taking up issues that we care about. Last Sunday was designed not to compete with those, but to create a different kind of space, where people could bring all aspects of themselves for conversation and connection. The name plays off the “First Thursday” tradition on South Congress Avenue in Austin, with perhaps an invocation of the Last Supper for some, though I want to be clear that none of us has any messianic inclinations.

We hope people will not only listen to what comes from the stage, but connect with friends and allies in the hall. We hope that existing progressive projects will be strengthened and that new ideas will emerge from those conversations.

So, there’s no hidden agenda tonight. We’re not recruiting or selling anything. Like so many, we’re just hungry for that conversation, that connection, that sense of community.

### **Okay, but what is Last Sunday really about?**

All the conversations that Eliza, Jim, and I had in planning this gathering eventually came back to a core point: Hard times are on the way, coming sooner than most of us expected, and we’re not ready for them.

We started with the recognition that for all its affluence and military power, the United States is in many ways a society in collapse. On all fronts -- politically, economically, culturally and most important, ecologically -- we are in trouble. We live in an increasingly callous culture that exploits sexuality and glorifies violence; embedded in a house-of-cards economy built on orgiastic consumption, deepening personal and collective debt, and an artificially inflated dollar; at the end of an imperial era that is grinding to a disastrous demise -- and, as if that weren’t enough, looming behind all those

crises is the recognition of the consequences of humans too-long ignoring the unraveling ecological fabric that makes life possible.

That's the bad news.

Here's the worse news: In this country, we do not have the cultural, economic, or political institutions in place to deal with these cascading crises.

Here's the even worse news: We don't have a lot of time left to build the institutions we need.

If one agrees with this view of the world to any degree, it seems to me there are two options for those of us with privilege.

1. We can seal ourselves off in gated communities (at the personal and/or the national level) with the highest walls and sharpest razor wire we can afford, hunker down with what we have acquired, and hope that somehow the collapse will be far enough off (in time and/or geography) that it won't touch us. Or,
2. We can get to work on making the human connections necessary to build the institutions we need to deal with what some call "the great correction" that is coming.

To some that may sound overly dramatic, maybe even alarmist. But for many of us, the alarms have already gone off, and this kind of analysis resonates in our hearts and our heads. It *feels* like what is happening, and it's consistent with what we *know* about the world. Even with that conviction, it's difficult to say all this in public, to risk being ridiculed as histrionic or hysterical. But that naming of the crisis is, I believe, one of the most creative acts we can undertake today. In 1957, Albert Camus explained:

"To create today is to create dangerously. Any publication is an act, and that act exposes one to the passions of an age that forgives nothing." [Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Vintage, 1960), p. 251.]

That is the simple goal of Last Sunday -- to offer some space for that creative activity, which has to begin in conversation, together, in a world that is not very forgiving.

### **Beyond cynicism to stubborn hope, authentically**

When I talk about the crises we face -- especially when I argue that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats are likely to be part of meaningful solutions -- people often accuse me of being cynical. So, let's deal with that up front.

I am not cynical. I am hopeful, realistically. After all, if I were cynical, I wouldn't do the political work that I do. As a privileged person, if I were cynical, I would avoid politics and enjoy the rather comfortable life I have without questioning it.

I once was cynical, but I changed. And I'd like to say a bit about how that happened.

When I was younger, I looked around and saw a world in pretty awful shape -- war, poverty, racism, sexism, and on and on. It was hard to be upbeat living at the end of the 20th century, one of the most brutal and bloody centuries in human history. As I came of age in the 1970s, it seemed to me these problems were the product of inherent human depravity that I took to be immutable. Given that analysis, I was cynical, which allowed me not to think much about why I was so privileged and to be smug and self-satisfied in my passivity and inaction.

But something started to shift in me in 1988, when I went to graduate school and had a chance to learn more about how the world works. I started to study and realized that the world was far worse off than I had ever imagined, that the suffering was deeper, and that the problems were rooted in powerful institutions not easily dislodged.

That's when I stopped being cynical and began to feel hopeful.

Now, that may seem counterintuitive. How did a deepening sense of the scale and scope of injustice and suffering make me hopeful? Because I started to understand that the problems of the world were not simply the product of an inherently evil and stupid human nature, though we can all be evil and stupid at times. Instead, I started to think about how systems and structures of power shape us and channel our behavior. I came to realize that the authority structures that so bend our lives are powerful and deeply entrenched. I also realized that most of the channels that the dominant culture offers us for working to make the world a better place are themselves deeply embedded in those authority structures, so that often the solutions become part of the problem. I realized that the analysis and action that could save us has to be more radical than I ever could have imagined, at a time when the culture is more depoliticized and right-wing than ever.

So, at the moment I realized the depth of the problem and the forces stacked against justice, I got hopeful. I think I saw the monster more clearly, but in that I also saw that the monster could be challenged and changed.

I am not saying I'm all that optimistic these days -- I said hopeful. I think to tell the truth about the world is to recognize the struggle for justice and sustainability is a long one, with no guarantee we will find our way there. Any reasonable strategy has to face honestly the obstacles, and it's hard to be optimistic about the short-term right now. But it's good to remember, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, that, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

It's possible to be hopeful for that continued bending, and I am. In part because history teaches us that struggles in the past have been successful, even if not complete. History also teaches us that there have always been people who didn't give in to cynicism, and those are the folks we honor today. Those people knew that the struggle for justice and

sustainability was not just the right thing to do. They realized that the real joy of living is in that struggle, together.

This is the basis for what I would call authentic hope. Authenticity is a tricky concept, but the best definition I've ever heard of it comes from my friend Abe Osheroff, who at 91 years old is still engaged in radical political activity, joyfully. Authenticity, Abe told me, is felt in that moment when what you *think* matches what you *say* and matches what you *do*; it's when you aren't afraid to say what you think and to act on what you say. We have to struggle for that authenticity, and it is worth struggling for.

[For more of Abe's insights, go to the transcript of my extensive interview with him at <http://www.thirdcoastactivist.org/osheroff.html>]

The first step in that is thinking. We need to spend some time creating an analysis that can move us forward, creating dangerously, perhaps. Let me offer a few more words from Camus, also from 1957:

"Tomorrow the world may burst into fragments. In that threat hanging over our heads there is a lesson of truth. As we face such a future, hierarchies, titles, honors are reduced to what they are in reality: a passing puff of smoke. And the only certainty left to us is that of naked suffering, common to all, intermingling its roots with those of a stubborn hope." [Camus, "The Wager of Our Generation," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, pp. 239-240.]

### **A framework for radical politics**

When I talk about radical politics, people ask me what I mean by that term, and then they often demand of me a clear plan on how to achieve those goals. Let me answer the latter question first: I don't have such a plan, and neither does anyone else. The challenges we face are such that anyone who pretends to have a highly developed plan to achieve a just and sustainable world is either a con artist or not very bright.

In other words, I believe we are at a point in human history where the complexity of the task means no one has the capabilities to fashion an alternative in great detail, and that's okay. We don't need a utopian vision, based either on old systems or new flights of fancy. We need to be clear on the nature of the struggle and begin to experiment.

That requires understanding the nature of the problem. Before we race ahead to solutions, we have to think more carefully about what we are struggling against. That's not negative; it's a supremely creative act, and a prerequisite to moving forward.

What can we say about radical politics in 2006? The first thing is to not be afraid of the word radical. I use it here in the sense of its basic meaning -- going to the root, trying to understand the nature of things.

If we look at the problems we're facing, we have to confront that at both the personal and planetary levels we are surrounded by systems based on a domination/subordination dynamic, which we have to challenge at all levels. There are at least five places we should be looking to do that: Race and gender/sexuality, capitalism and empire, and the coming ecological collapse.

The first two, race and gender, are often dismissed as mere "identity politics," and there certainly is a way that "diversity talk" can derail radical politics. But there is no way to talk about progressive social change in this country and the wider world if we don't confront the pathologies of white supremacy and patriarchy, both of which are woven deeply into the fabric of this society. Such terms may seem old-fashioned, but we live in a world of racialized disparities in wealth and well-being rooted not in the inadequacy of people of color but in white dominance, and a world in which women still face the limitations and threats that come from male dominance.

We also can see that those ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchy are linked to the systems of capitalism and empire, which are rooted in the glorification of a hyper-competitive, violent masculinity and an assertion of a claim of the inherent superiority of Europe and the United States. Capitalism creates a world defined by greed that reduces us to crass maximizers of self-interest, not exactly a recipe for decent living. Empire is the extraction of the wealth of the many to enrich increasingly fewer, not exactly a morally defensible model.

This leaves us in a world in which half the people on the planet live on less than \$2 a day. Let that statistic sink in: More than 3 billion people survive -- for food, shelter, clothing, education, medical care -- on less than any one of us might spend on a fancy cup of coffee in the morning. Those people living at that level of poverty are disproportionately non-white and female. They live mostly in a Third World that has suffered, and continues to suffer, from military and economic domination by the First World, most centrally the United States.

Radical politics says not only that this state of affairs is unjust, but so are the institutions that produce it. And these systems must be changed.

And then there is the question of sustainability. Look at any crucial measure of the health of the ecosphere in which we live -- groundwater depletion, topsoil loss, chemical contamination, increased toxicity in our own bodies, the expanding dead zone in the Gulf, accelerating extinction of species and reduction of bio-diversity. Look at all that and ask a simple question: Where we are heading? Remember also that we live in an oil-based world that is fast running out of oil, which means we face a huge reconfiguration of the infrastructure that undergirds our lives. And, of course, there is the undeniable trajectory of rapid climate change.

Add all that up, and it's not a pretty picture. It's crucial we realize that there are no technological fixes that will rescue us. We have to go to the root and acknowledge that human attempts to dominate the non-human world have failed. We are destroying the

planet and in the process destroying ourselves. Here, just as in human relationships, we either abandon the dominance/subordination dynamic or we don't survive.

To me, that is radical politics -- to the root. When I talk like this, I'm often told I need to be realistic. I think I am being realistic. I am realistically assessing the nature of the systems and institutions, which is necessary if we are to make progress toward real justice and sustainability.

### **We may fail, but we can fail together**

One of the most important steps for me in this process has been the recognition that we may fail, that the human species may be an evolutionary dead-end, that our collective life may be in the nature of dramatic tragedy. If that is the case -- and no one can know for sure that it isn't -- then at least we can fail together, struggling toward authentic hope, finding the joy in that struggle.

I want to conclude with Camus, not a place one would expect to go for an upbeat ending. In a 1948 talk at a monastery, Camus urged people to "give up empty quarrels" and "pay attention to what unites rather than to what separates us" in the struggle to recover from the horrors of Europe's barbarism. I take from Camus a sense of how to live the tension between facing honestly the horror and yet remaining engaged. In that same talk, he spoke of "the forces of terror" (forces which exist on "our" side as much as on "theirs") and the "forces of dialogue" (which also exist everywhere in the world). Where do we place our hopes?

"Between the forces of terror and the forces of dialogue, a great unequal battle has begun," he wrote. "I have nothing but reasonable illusions as to the outcome of that battle. But I believe it must be fought." [Camus, "The Unbeliever and Christians," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, pp. 72-73.]

So, back to tonight's original question: Just what exactly is Last Sunday? Maybe just an expression of faith in the forces of dialogue, a plea for reasonable illusions, a reminder that -- no matter what our chances -- the battle must be fought.

## The problem with solutions

[Remarks to the second “Last Sunday” community gathering in Austin, TX, December 29, 2006.]

I’ve been assigned to talk about solutions to the pressing problems we face, but I’ve never been very good at following orders. So, instead I’m going to talk about the problem with solutions.

The assignment came from our first “Last Sunday” event in November, which we hoped would bring together the secular and spiritual, the political and the social. The standing-room-only audience generated a lot of positive energy that night, but that doesn’t mean the event -- or the ideas animating it -- were immune from criticism. And, this being Austin, we heard from lots of folks about what they thought those shortcomings were.

Two consistent themes emerged from the feedback, captured in this suggestion card:

“Don’t spend so much of our precious time telling us about the problems. We already know (most of) the problems. Instead, spend more time telling us about solutions that we, as individuals, and as a group, can do. We are looking for HOPE. Show us how we can be part of the solution.”

Over and over, not just after Last Sunday, but ever since I started doing political organizing, I’ve heard this: “We already know the problems -- tell us about solutions.” While I understand the sentiment, I want to suggest that the first claim is inaccurate, and the second request is dangerous.

First, we -- not just the so-called “masses” out there, but we in here -- have not yet fully grasped the nature of the problems we face. Second, as we are struggling to come to terms with the depth of those problems, we have yet to face the fact that there are no solutions. In other words: (1) None of us is as smart as we would like to think, and (2) as we start to recognize our own collective ignorance, we will have to face not just what we can do but what we can’t.

Perhaps paradoxically, that is where I find hope -- in facing honestly the condition of the world that we have desecrated and the limits of human intelligence to reconsecrate that world. It is only from those realizations, I believe, that meaningful action is possible.

### The problems go deep

When I say we don’t know the problems, I don’t mean we aren’t aware of what is plainly in front of us: Disastrously destructive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a house-of-cards economy, enduring racism and sexism, cascading ecological crises, and a corrosive culture that values profit over people. But how deep does our analysis go? How well do we really understand the inherent pathology of capitalism and patriotism? How many of

us have dared to stare down the ugliness and raw brutality at the core of white supremacy and patriarchy?

And have we honestly assessed the tension between those aspects of our human nature (our capacity for greed and violence) that created those problems and those aspects (our capacity for solidarity and love) that make transcending these problems possible? As the song goes, “all you need is love,” but the problem is we also have a lot more than love swirling around in each of us.

We have to face the fact that we are a species that has, in the words of Wes Jackson, gotten very good at exploiting the energy-rich carbon in this world’s soils, forests, and fossil fuels to enrich ourselves at the expense of others. That’s part of human nature. Now we have to do what no other species has had to do -- self-consciously practice restraint at what we do best in such bad ways. That is no small task, but our ability to name that task and imagine accomplishing it also is part of human nature.

If we all really understood the problems in this sense, we might not be so quick to demand solutions -- if by that term we mean clear public-policy choices that can be implemented in the relatively short term. Such a yearning for short-term solutions is, I believe, the best indication that one hasn’t come to terms with the depth of the problems.

Take the problem of oil -- both that we are running out and that burning what’s left will accelerate rapid climate change. A demand for solutions can lead to the corporate boondoggle of corn-based ethanol or the hazy illusions around biodiesel, instead of helping us face a more troubling reality: There is no viable alternative to petroleum for a car-based transportation system that it is fundamentally unsustainable. What are the possible “solutions” to that “problem,” which we all allegedly know about, other than to radically curtail the way we move ourselves about?

### **The solutions aren’t simple**

This doesn’t mean there’s nothing we can do. It doesn’t mean there aren’t things we should do. There are actions we can take, and we have to work hard to make sure we take the best possible actions to try to reverse the direction of a world headed for the cliff. In the realm of portable liquid fuels, economically and ecologically it’s clear that corn-based ethanol is a loser that should be abandoned, while biodiesel has limited possibilities that should be pursued, but realistically. But as we pursue those “solutions,” we also have to face a fact: There are no solutions that will allow us to continue to live this way. There is only the struggle to find something new, with no guarantees we will find our way.

Why press such a seemingly dour scenario? Because anything else is illusion, and illusions can never carry us home. Illusions inevitably fall away, leaving people feeling abandoned, depressed, and hopeless. Illusions are not practical.

Ruthlessly rejecting illusions is not the same as giving up hope. But we have to be clear that hope isn't something to be found out in the world; it's a feature of our humanity that each of us has to either claim or abandon. It's a state of being, not a function of the state of the world.

When I make this argument, I am often told that illusions are necessary, that people can't handle this level of honesty. I take that to mean that the person making this judgment about other people's limitations actually is really saying "*I need my illusions because I can't handle this level of honesty.*" I say that with no arrogance, knowing how I struggle to handle it.

The only way I can keep up that struggle is collectively, in community, through conversation. That's what Last Sunday is about. We did not create this space to pretend that those of us on stage know all the right questions, let alone the answers. We have no solutions to offer. Instead, we offer an invitation and an invocation, a place and a space -- and, okay, yes, we offer our sense of hope, of what can come from coming together.

### **A profound state of grief**

But that hope must begin with honesty. Here's my honest statement:

I stand before you in a profound state of grief for the state of the world. For me, Last Sunday is about creating a place to feel that, honestly. Last month, Jim Rigby quoted the anarchist Emma Goldman on the subject of joy in politics, reminding us that we should reject any revolution in which we can't dance.

But just as important, I won't be part of any revolution in which I can't cry. I think we have to recognize this grief. We have to demand that the revolution be one in which we not only can dance, but cry as well.

One of my favorite writers, Wendell Berry, talks of coming to terms with "the human estate of grief and joy." What an apt way to describe the essence of what it means to be human. When we face honestly our place in the world, we recognize the need to cry and to dance. We recognize that each requires the other.

Last Sunday, whatever else it may be, is the attempt to name that estate honestly, to claim that estate responsibly, to remind ourselves of how much work we have to do if we are to live there with hope.

## What to do with/about white folks?

[Remarks to the third “Last Sunday” community gathering in Austin, TX, January 28, 2007.]

After the initial “Last Sunday” gathering in November, many people made the observation that it was a mostly white audience, and then asked the question, “How can we attract more people of color to the event?”

The observation about the complexion of the group was important to acknowledge, but I think it was diversionary to move right away to that question. Instead of asking how to diversify the event, it’s crucial that we white folks be able to ask: (1) “Why are there so few non-white people here?” and (2) “What is our motivation in wanting more non-white people here?” I think only after we have dealt with those questions can we start to work to transform Last Sunday -- and other predominantly white events, groups, and movements -- in ways that challenge white supremacy rather than reinforce white privilege.

Put more bluntly: The goal shouldn’t be just diversity but the end of white supremacy, a much more ambitious goal but one that can be the basis for real hope.

These questions of language are not arcane; it’s crucial that we pay attention to the terms we use to deal with the question of race. Do we speak of diversity and multiculturalism, or do we acknowledge that we live in a white-supremacist society and confront unearned white privilege? The difference is important. While most people -- even many conservatives -- accept that we live in a diverse multicultural society, fewer are willing to name the contemporary United States as a white-supremacist society and acknowledge that white people have unearned privilege.

Naming the United States as white supremacist doesn’t mean all white people run around in white sheets or join neo-Nazi militias. Instead, it marks the fact that racialized disparities in wealth and well-being endure -- and in some cases have deepened -- even 40 years after the major gains of the civil-rights movement. It marks the fact that many white people -- maybe the majority? a significant majority? -- still believe that what has come out of Europe is inherently superior. Maybe even many white liberals who celebrate diversity still secretly believe that the art, music, politics, and philosophy that come from white parts of the world are more sophisticated, more important, simply better. So, we live in a world where we (1) speak of our commitment to racial justice yet accept a white-supremacist distribution of resources and (2) speak of our commitment to valuing all traditions yet go to schools that reflect a white-supremacist ideology.

And, just to drive home the point: Some white people go to churches that still have pictures of a white Jesus. Remember that Jesus was a Jew from Palestine. He wasn’t European, wasn’t white. But he’s white in pictures that still hang on the walls of some churches, which means those churches and the culture in which they thrive are white-suprem...

## **Beyond diversity and multiculturalism**

So, acknowledging and celebrating that we are a multiracial and multiethnic society is a good thing. Multiculturalism is a value. Working to eliminate all-white spaces is a good thing. Diversity is important. But that's not enough.

So, let's go back to the questions I think we should be asking.

(1) "Why are there so few non-white people here?"

One thing to ponder: Maybe non-white people don't like being around us white folks? Why might that be? Could it be because we haven't done enough to transcend the white-supremacist culture in which we live, and non-white people recognize that, and they have better things to do with their time than hang out with us? I don't know the answer to that, and there's certainly not one answer for all non-white people. But it's something worth considering.

Another related thing to consider: Maybe non-white people don't trust us white people, especially when we gather in large groups. After all, large groups of white people traditionally have not been safe spaces for non-white people. Much violence against non-white people has come when lots of white people have gotten together.

And one more thing worth thinking about: Last Sunday is an event specifically designed to create a sense of community for many of us who lack that in our everyday lives. What if people in non-white communities already have a sense of community, rooted in their common experience of dealing with white supremacy? If that's the case, what's the great attraction of this event to them?

I am not claiming to know the answer to the question #1. But it seems like something we should ponder. But even harder to face is question is #2.

(2) "What is our motivation in wanting more non-white people here?"

One person offering suggestions about how to diversify Last Sunday wrote, "I do not believe that Austin is so segregated that progressive white people do not know progressive people of color." Certainly there are white people in Austin who know non-white people in Austin, either as friends or political allies or both. But does that comment reveal what we don't like to admit: We are not a truly integrated society. What if, in fact, Austin is that segregated? We may not want to believe it, but maybe it is. And if it is, is our quest for an integrated Last Sunday the desire to avoid that reality?

A dozen years ago, a Chicana friend of mine at the University of Texas told me that her first question of white people was, "Do you have a real friend who isn't white?" She meant someone you trusted, that you could ask most anything of and vice versa. When

she said that, I swallowed hard. She was my first real non-white friend. I was 36 years old. If any of us were to list our non-white friends today -- real friends, people whom I trust and who trust me -- how long would that list be?

Most of us live in overwhelmingly segregated worlds, and that fact makes us many of us uncomfortable. But here's the hard question: Are we uncomfortable with it because we really wish we didn't live in segregated worlds, or are we uncomfortable with it because we don't like having to face that we live rather comfortably day-to-day in segregated worlds? In one of our ordinary days, how much are we really bothered by that segregation?

So, the question: Do we want Last Sunday -- or any other event, group, or movement to which we white folks belong -- to be more multiracial so we don't have to face these facts? Again, I don't know, and I don't want to suggest there's one answer for all white people. But it's a question we should ask. That doesn't mean we shouldn't think about how this event might become a place where racial divides could potentially be bridged. Things have to start somewhere, and this is as good a place as any. I'm simply suggesting that we have to proceed on that project honestly. And, in my experience, we white folks aren't so good at being honest. There's a reason for that, I think. We're afraid.

### **White fears**

Talking about the racial fears of white people in a white-supremacist society may seem silly. What do we white people really have to be afraid of? The easy answer is that we are afraid of ourselves.

Yes, it's true that some of us still harbor certain fears of non-white people. For example, I was socialized to be reflexively afraid of black men in public, and I still sometimes struggle with that in certain situations. And some white people fear that when non-white people gain political and economic power they may take some of "our" goodies away and then we might have to become a more just society in the distribution of resources. That would mean that we have less.

But I think the more troubling struggle for many of us white folks is the fear of being seen, and seen-through, by non-white people. If most of us white people carry some level of racism in our minds and hearts and bodies -- if we know that even when we've "worked on our racism" there are at least remnants of white supremacy in us -- we must know that it could come out at any time, maybe in ways we can't control, maybe in ways so subtle we can't even recognize it. And what if non-white people look at us and can see it? What if they can see through us? What if they can look past our carefully crafted anti-racist vocabulary and sense that we still don't really know how to treat them as equals? What if they know about us what we don't dare know about ourselves?

Maybe it is self-indulgent to talk about white people's fears, given the real threats that non-white people face in a white-supremacist society. But we have to talk about it

because that fear often keeps us white people from stepping out and stepping up. Because we are privileged, we can back away from difficult situations, avoiding the risk of being seen more honestly by someone else, someone who isn't white. I know that in my life I have sometimes held back out of that fear. I have a feeling I'm not alone in that.

### **When we think we “get it”**

I don't think any of this means we should give up, that we white people can never make any progress on racism, that it's all hopeless. Instead, it's like all the other struggles for social justice that force us to contend with oppressions that are deeply embedded not only into the institutions and systems in which we live but also in our bodies: We struggle, we make progress, we feel good about that, and then -- if we are paying attention -- we realize we have further to go. Here's an example of that process, one in which I play the fool.

Last year I was stopped by a police officer for running what he thought was a red light (I contended it was yellow, of course). It was late at night, I had been at work all day, and I was cranky. I was dressed in a ratty T-shirt and shorts. At the time I was driving a beat-up old Volkswagen Beetle. In other words, I didn't look like one of Austin's leading citizens. When I saw the red lights flashing, I pulled off the busy street onto an unlit side street to get out of traffic. When the officer asked me for my registration and insurance, I opened the glove compartment and out popped a small knife, folded up, that I carry for emergencies. The officer, who was white, politely asked if I would mind if he held that knife while we talked. I handed it to him, he wrote me my ticket, returned the knife to me, and off I drove.

During a lecture on racial justice a few months later, I told that story as an illustration of white privilege. I made the obvious point that if I had been black when that knife popped out, the officer might not have been so calm. Maybe I would have ended up outside the car, face down on the pavement. Maybe worse. There's no way to know, of course, but that's the point of the concept of “driving while black (or brown)” -- it's not that every time you are stopped you are going to experience police violence, but that you can never be sure.

So, I'm telling this story, pointing out that when the knife popped out and the cop didn't treat me like a threat, didn't pull me out of the car with gun drawn, that I was benefiting from white privilege. A black man in the audience agreed with that, but then brought me up short. “You're right about all that, but what you don't understand is that your white privilege kicked in before the cop stopped you,” he said. He went on to explain that he would have never pulled onto the unlit side street. “I would have pulled over to the side of the busy street, in plain view,” he said. “You didn't even think about that, did you?”

No, I hadn't thought about that. I hadn't thought that if a cop wanted to mess with me it would be easier on an unlit street than on a busy street. I hadn't thought about it, because

I didn't stop to think the cop might mess with me. I knew that the worse-case scenario would be that he would write me a ticket.

That black man was kind enough to point out to me that I didn't know as much as I thought I knew. He was kind in his critique, but he didn't hold back. For that I was grateful. I learned something that night. It's a good thing to learn.

### **The basis for real hope**

The unifying theme of Last Sunday is coming together to confront honestly the depth of the problems -- political, cultural, economic, ecological -- that we face. Earlier I made the claim that this kind of blunt talk is the basis of real hope, which may seem counterintuitive. Who wants to think things are this difficult? I certainly don't want to, but I see no other path.

The reason I think we have to get beyond "diversity talk" is that it doesn't answer people's needs. Non-white people recognize that multiculturalism doesn't ask much of white people. When we are honest with ourselves, white people understand it doesn't ask enough of us.

To echo remarks I've made at other Last Sundays, maybe this race thing has no solution. I don't mean that no white person can ever transcend white supremacy to have an authentic relationship with a non-white person. I don't mean that we must remain stuck in an overtly racist framework. But maybe 500 years of modern racism -- rooted in Europe's and the United States' brutal project of grabbing a disproportionate share of the world's resources, rationalized by a white-supremacist ideology -- simply can't be overcome in the time we have available to us. If that's the case, well, so be it. Let's go forward to make the best we can make of it.

Let's heal where we can.

Let's pass on less of this insanity to our children.

Let's organize to support projects that can get us a bit closer to real justice.

And let's tell as much of the truth as we can bear.

Here's the truth that I see: So far, we -- those of us who make up white America, including me and others here tonight -- have largely failed at this project. It's a big project with many obstacles. Maybe we will continue to fail. Since we know a bit about our past failures, let's at least commit to failing in new ways. Maybe we'll be surprised by where that failure leads us.

## Liberal icons and the problem of bipartisan empire-building

[Remarks to the fourth “Last Sunday” community gathering in Austin, TX, February 18, 2007.]

In a political culture defined by a very narrow centrist-to-reactionary political spectrum, Paul Wellstone was a breath of fresh air when he brought his progressive politics to the U.S. Senate in 1991. His death in 2002 robbed the country of a humane voice on the national political stage.

I lived for a time in Minnesota and followed Wellstone’s career closely. The last time I saw him speak was December 1998 when I was part of a peace group that conducted a sit-in at his office to protest his support for a U.S. attack on Iraq and won a meeting to challenge the former anti-war activist’s hawkish turn. Yes, that’s right -- a group sat in at Wellstone’s St. Paul office when he supported Bill Clinton’s illegal 1998 cruise missile attack on Iraq, which was the culmination of a belligerent U.S. policy during that Democratic administration.

It might seem odd to recall such a small part of contemporary history when the United States is mired in a full-scale occupation of Iraq, but there’s an important lesson in this little bit of history -- one that’s is often difficult for many liberals and Democrats to face:

Illegal and immoral U.S. aggression is, and always has been, a bipartisan affair. Democrats and liberals are responsible for their share of the death, destruction, and misery caused by U.S. empire-building along with Republicans and conservatives. I mention the Wellstone incident not to suggest he and George W. Bush are equally culpable, but to make the point that even politicians with Wellstone’s progressive politics can be twisted by the pathology of power and privilege.

Precisely because we face such crucial policy choices in Iraq, the Middle East, and the world, we must remember that while W. and the neocons are *a* problem, they are not *the* problem. Sweep this particular gang of thugs and thieves out of office, and ... what? A kinder-and-gentler imperial policy designed by Democrats is still an imperial policy, and imperial policies always have the same result: The suffering of millions -- people who are too often invisible to us, people who live in places far away from us -- in support of policies that protect the affluence of ... us.

Name a politician at the national level today who has even come close to acknowledging that painful reality. Go ahead, think about it for a minute -- I can wait.

I’m reminded of a meeting that a group of Austin activists had with our congressman, liberal Democrat Lloyd Doggett, as part of a national grassroots organizing effort in the late 1990s to end the punishing embargo on Iraq that the Clinton administration imposed for eight long years. Those economic sanctions were killing an estimated 5,000 Iraqi children a month, and it’s likely that as many as a million people died during the Clinton

years as a result of this aspect of the U.S. policy of dominating the politics of the region. We asked Doggett -- who had courageously spoken out against U.S. aggression in the past -- to challenge this policy of his Democratic leadership, which he declined to do. One of us mentioned our opposition to this in the context of a larger critique of U.S. empire. Doggett's response: "That was never my analysis."

In other words, even though the United States has been pursuing imperial policies since it was founded -- first on the continent it eventually conquered and later around the world -- that wasn't his analysis. In other words, his analysis was apparently to deny the reality of how the United States became the most powerful nation-state in the history of the world. In other words, his analysis required obscuring difficult truths, which might be called a ... I'll leave that sentence for you to complete.

Again, my purpose in pointing this out is not to suggest that there is no difference in the policies of Doggett and Bush, but rather to point out the disease at the heart of conventional politics in the United States: The willingness to lie about the history and contemporary policies that have made us the most affluent society in the history of the world.

The political elites of the United States of America are united in their acceptance of these historical fabrications and contemporary obfuscations. Whatever their particular policy proposals, they all lie about the nature of the system that has produced U.S. power and affluence. They all invoke mythical notions of the fundamental decency of the United States. And because of that, they all are part of the problem.

### **Let's start by telling the truth about our history and our politicians**

Here's a gentle corrective: People can be decent, and many in the United States -- just as everywhere in the world -- are incredibly decent, but no imperial nation-state has ever had any fundamental decency. The rich First World nations of this world got rich through violence and theft. That doesn't mean there's nothing positive about the U.S. system, but is simply a reminder that if we start with a lie, we end up telling lots of lies and doing lots of damage.

So, let's tell the truth, not only about our political opponents but about our alleged allies. Let's tell the truth about the so-called "human rights" president, Jimmy Carter, a man who has accomplished some good things since leaving office and lately has been brave in standing up to critics who denounce him for telling part of the truth about the Israel/Palestine conflict (the part that ignores his own contributions while in office to the entrenchment of Israeli power and control, and hence to contemporary policy failures).

But Jimmy Carter as president -- the person he was when he held power -- was a person who, for example, backed the brutal rule of the Shah of Iran and, after the Iranian people has overthrown that dictatorship, allowed the shah to come to the United States. Carter continued to support and arm the military dictatorship of Indonesia through the worst of

the genocidal atrocities in its illegal occupation of East Timor. Not exactly human-rights kinds of policies.

Nor was a concern for human rights in evidence in Carter's policy toward El Salvador. By coincidence, yesterday (February 17) was the 27th anniversary of a letter that Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote to Carter, pleading with him to support human rights by ending U.S. funding and arms transfers to the authoritarian government of El Salvador. Romero wrote to Carter that "instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government's contribution will undoubtedly sharpen the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people, whose struggle has often been for respect for their most basic human rights." Carter's response was to continue support for the brutal military dictatorship that put guns in the hands of death squads, including one that would assassinate Romero a month later.

And then there is the famous "Carter Doctrine" proclaimed in his 1980 State of the Union address, in which he made "absolutely clear" his position on the oil-rich region: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

In other words: Control over the flow of Middle East oil must remain in U.S. hands. Hmm, does that seem familiar? There was, of course, no outside force attempting to gain control of the region. But plenty of forces within the region -- then and now -- have wanted to break decades of U.S. domination, and those forces have been the real targets of the doctrine of Carter, and every other post-WWII president before and since. While the primary responsibility for the mess we have created in Iraq should be laid on the doorstep of Bush and the neocons, there's a lot of responsibility left to go around.

### **Bi-partisan victims**

Let me be clear one more time: I am not saying that there is no difference between Paul Wellstone, Lloyd Doggett, Jimmy Carter on one hand, and George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell on the other. There is, and sometimes those differences make a difference.

But ask yourself: Are the victims of these bipartisan policies around the world likely to be so concerned about the differences? When Lloyd Doggett and many other Democrats in Congress were supporting Clinton's sanctions policy -- fully aware that children in Iraq were dying by the thousands due to a lack of clean water, medical supplies, and adequate nutrition -- should we expect those children to be grateful that the Democrats had a better record on the minimum wage? When Jimmy Carter shipped weapons for death squads in El Salvador, should the campesinos murdered with those weapons have been grateful that Carter wasn't as reactionary as the Reagan gang that would come next?

Yes, Paul Wellstone was in many ways an inspirational progressive figure at a time of right-wing backlash, and he often was politically courageous. But if we ignore the ways that politicians -- even the best of them -- can come to accept the illusions of the powerful that so often lead to pathological delusions and disastrous policies, how can a peace-and-justice movement hope to hold power accountable?

I'm not arguing for a holier-than-thou purism on all doctrine at all times; we have to be strategic in offering support to politicians with whom we inevitably will have some disagreements. Instead, I'm arguing for an honest assessment of politicians, and of ourselves. If we are willing to excuse so quickly the pro-imperial policies of our so-called progressive leaders, might that be in part because we haven't broken with the imperial mindset ourselves?

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan crumble under the weight of this imperial madness, we owe it to the people there not only to critique the policies of the psychotically self-righteous madmen of the Bush administration, and not only to point out that the current Democratic leadership is too timid in its opposition to these wars. We owe it to Iraqis and Afghans -- and to all the people living in places that our empire targets -- to critique the allegedly more humane and liberal face of empire.

If we look in the mirror, whose face is that?

## Anti-capitalism in five minutes or less

[Remarks to the final “Last Sunday” community gathering in Austin, TX, April 29, 2007.]

We know that capitalism is not just the most sensible way to organize an economy but is now the only possible way to organize an economy. We know that dissenters to this conventional wisdom can, and should, be ignored. There’s no longer even any need to persecute such heretics; they are obviously irrelevant.

How do we know all this? Because we are told so, relentlessly -- typically by those who have the most to gain from such a claim, most notably those in the business world and their functionaries and apologists in the schools, universities, mass media, and mainstream politics. Capitalism is not a choice, but rather simply *is*, like a state of nature. Maybe not *like a* state of nature, but *the* state of nature. To contest capitalism these days is like arguing against the air that we breathe. Arguing against capitalism, we’re told, is simply crazy.

We are told, over and over, that capitalism is not just the system we have, but the only system we can ever have. Yet for many, something nags at us about such a claim. Could this really be the only option? We’re told we shouldn’t even think about such things. But we can’t help thinking -- is this really the “end of history,” in the sense that big thinkers have used that phrase to signal the final victory of global capitalism? If this is the end of history in that sense, we wonder, can the actual end of the planet far behind?

We wonder, we fret, and these thoughts nag at us -- for good reason. Capitalism -- or, more accurately, the predatory corporate capitalism that defines and dominates our lives - - will be our death if we don’t escape it. Crucial to progressive politics is finding the language to articulate that reality, not in outdated dogmatic slogans that alienate but in plain language that resonates with people. We should be searching for ways to explain to co-workers in water-cooler conversations -- radical politics in five minutes or less -- why we must abandon predatory corporate capitalism. If we don’t, we may well be facing the end times, and such an end will bring rupture not rapture.

Here’s my shot at the language for this argument.

Capitalism is admittedly an incredibly productive system that has created a flood of goods unlike anything the world has ever seen. It also is a system that is fundamentally (1) inhuman, (2) anti-democratic, and (3) unsustainable. Capitalism has given those of us in the First World lots of stuff (most of it of marginal or questionable value) in exchange for our souls, our hope for progressive politics, and the possibility of a decent future for children.

In short, either we change or we die -- spiritually, politically, literally.

## **1. Capitalism is inhuman**

There is a theory behind contemporary capitalism. We're told that because we are greedy, self-interested animals, an economic system must reward greedy, self-interested behavior if we are to thrive economically.

Are we greedy and self-interested? Of course. At least I am, sometimes. But we also just as obviously are capable of compassion and selflessness. We certainly can act competitively and aggressively, but we also have the capacity for solidarity and cooperation. In short, human nature is wide-ranging. Our actions are certainly rooted in our nature, but all we really know about that nature is that it is widely variable. In situations where compassion and solidarity are the norm, we tend to act that way. In situations where competitiveness and aggression are rewarded, most people tend toward such behavior.

Why is it that we must choose an economic system that undermines the most decent aspects of our nature and strengthens the most inhuman? Because, we're told, that's just the way people are. What evidence is there of that? Look around, we're told, at how people behave. Everywhere we look, we see greed and the pursuit of self-interest. So, the proof that these greedy, self-interested aspects of our nature are dominant is that, when forced into a system that rewards greed and self-interested behavior, people often act that way. Doesn't that seem just a bit circular?

## **2. Capitalism is anti-democratic**

This one is easy. Capitalism is a wealth-concentrating system. If you concentrate wealth in a society, you concentrate power. Is there any historical example to the contrary?

For all the trappings of formal democracy in the contemporary United States, everyone understands that the wealthy dictate the basic outlines of the public policies that are acceptable to the vast majority of elected officials. People can and do resist, and an occasional politician joins the fight, but such resistance takes extraordinary effort. Those who resist win victories, some of them inspiring, but to date concentrated wealth continues to dominate. Is this any way to run a democracy?

If we understand democracy as a system that gives ordinary people a meaningful way to participate in the formation of public policy, rather than just a role in ratifying decisions made by the powerful, then it's clear that capitalism and democracy are mutually exclusive.

Let's make this concrete. In our system, we believe that regular elections with the one-person/one-vote rule, along with protections for freedom of speech and association, guarantee political equality. When I go to the polls, I have one vote. When Bill Gates goes the polls, he has one vote. Bill and I both can speak freely and associate with others

for political purposes. Therefore, as equal citizens in our fine democracy, Bill and I have equal opportunities for political power. Right?

### **3. Capitalism is unsustainable**

This one is even easier. Capitalism is a system based on unlimited growth. The last time I checked, this is a finite planet. There are only two ways out of this one. Perhaps we will be hopping to a new planet soon. Or perhaps, because we need to figure out ways to cope with these physical limits, we will invent ever-more complex technologies to transcend those limits.

Both those positions are equally delusional. Delusions may bring temporary comfort, but they don't solve problems. They tend, in fact, to cause more problems, and those problems seem to be piling up.

Capitalism is not, of course, the only unsustainable system that humans have devised, but it is the most obviously unsustainable system, and it's the one in which we are stuck. It's the one that we are told is inevitable and natural, like the air.

#### **A tale of two acronyms: TGIF and TINA**

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's famous response to a question about challenges to capitalism was TINA -- There Is No Alternative. If there is no alternative, anyone who questions capitalism is crazy.

Here's another, more common, acronym about life under a predatory corporate capitalism: TGIF -- Thank God It's Friday. It's a phrase that communicates a sad reality for many working in this economy -- the jobs we do often are not rewarding, not enjoyable, and fundamentally not worth doing. We do them to survive. Then on Friday we go out and get drunk to forget about that reality, hoping we can find something during the weekend that makes it possible on Monday to, in the words of one songwriter, "get up and do it again."

Remember, an economic system doesn't just produce goods, but produces people as well. Our experience of work shapes us. Our experience of consuming those goods shapes us. Increasingly, we are a nation of unhappy people consuming miles of aisles of cheap consumer goods, hoping to dull the pain of unfulfilling work. Is this who we want to be?

We're told TINA in a TGIF world. Doesn't that seem a bit strange? Is there really no alternative to such a world? Of course there is. Anything that is the product of human choices can be chosen differently. We don't need to spell out a new system in all its specifics to realize there always are alternatives. We can encourage the existing institutions that provide a site of resistance (such as labor unions) while we experiment

with new forms (such as local cooperatives). But the first step is calling out the system for what it is, without guarantees of what's to come.

## **Home and abroad**

In the First World, we struggle with this alienation and fear. We often don't like the values of the world around us; we often don't like the people we've become; we often are afraid of what's to come of us. But in the First World, most of us eat regularly. That's not the case everywhere. Let's focus not only on the conditions we face within a predatory corporate capitalist system, living in the most affluent country in the history of the world, but also put this in a global context.

Let me return to a statistic I cited on the first Last Sunday: Half the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day. That's more than 3 billion people.

Here's a new statistic that I recently read: Just over half of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lives on less than \$1 a day. That's more than 300 million people.

How about one more statistic: About 500 children in Africa die from poverty-related diseases, and the majority of those deaths could be averted with simple medicines or insecticide-treated nets. That's 500 children -- not every year, or every month or every week. That's not 500 children every day. Poverty-related diseases claim the lives of 500 children every hour in Africa.

As we try to hold onto our humanity, statistics like that can make us crazy. But don't get any crazy ideas about changing this system. Remember TINA: There is no alternative to predatory corporate capitalism.

## **TGILS: Thank God It's Last Sunday**

We have been gathering on Last Sunday precisely to be crazy together. We've come together to give voice to things that we know and feel, even when the dominant culture tells us that to believe and feel such things is crazy. Maybe everyone here is a little crazy. So, let's make sure we're being realistic. It's important to be realistic.

One of the common responses I hear when I critique capitalism is, "Well, that may all be true, but we have to be realistic and do what's possible." By that logic, to be realistic is to accept a system that is inhuman, anti-democratic, and unsustainable. To be realistic we are told we must capitulate to a system that steals our souls, enslaves us to concentrated power, and will someday destroy the planet.

But rejecting and resisting a predatory corporate capitalism is not crazy. It is an eminently sane position. Holding onto our humanity is not crazy. Defending democracy is not crazy. And struggling for a sustainable future is not crazy.

What is truly crazy is falling for the con that an inhuman, anti-democratic, and unsustainable system -- one that leaves half the world's people in abject poverty -- is all that there is, all that there ever can be, all that there ever will be.

If that were true, then soon there will be nothing left, for anyone.

I do not believe it is realistic to accept such a fate. If that's being realistic, I'll take crazy any day of the week, every Sunday of the month.

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