

What Would Adam Do?

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Delivered at UUFRC on Sunday December 7, 2003

Well, you might have assumed that this was about the Old Testament figure 'A-Dam. I *am* a minister — our First Father, Adam, seems a likely subject. But in fact I am thinking about Adam Smith. Adam, the economist and author of The Wealth of Nations. Adam Smith lived in the eighteenth century, and spoke to the idea of free trade. Trade without governments getting involved. His work has been co-opted by big business and multi-national corporations in our time, as support for how they do business and want government to butt out.

But there was a huge difference in Adam's view of human nature and how big business apparently operates today. Adam Smith believed in what he called "the unseen hand." He had a belief that, left unfettered, human beings would *always* seek the good for all. Somehow that is not the way business seems to be, here in the twenty-first century

I think I know how Adam Smith would feel about the WTO, the World Bank, and the growing numbers of poor people in our world — maybe especially those in the United States, where there *is* enough to go around — who are not included in the decision-making. At least I know how *I* feel about big business, and I am *not* neutral. Neither do I am have any genuine expertise, but this is a place where I have a strong opinion anyway.

If you were expecting an even-handed analysis of modern economics from a well-researched position, I'm sorry. This is from my heart. Sometimes, my heart is so sure, that it feels right to speak up. I am just horrified by modern big business. I am so unhappy, that I am beginning to rethink capitalism and revisit Karl Marx.

Do I have your attention? Let me reassure you that this will not be about statistics and trends and careful analysis. This is about what just plain smells rotten to me.

If you come away stirred up, even if you are mostly stirred up by my un-careful statements, that will be fine. I will feel better knowing you are engaged from any cause than disinterested.

Big businesses quote Smith, who said that it was better if governments did not limit the size of corporations or limit their power. Smith did not believe in government intervention because he believed that a free market would provide a fair return for all parties.

Here's what I think. Smith spoke into a social structure where people were aware that they were interconnected. He felt that government should not be involved when the price of grain would be determined between the farmers who grew it and the folks who processed and sold it. These were communities of people working in ways that everyone would get something that they needed. It is not goofy to hope that this vision would accommodate larger and larger companies and more and more complicated transactions, but in fact, we have gone way off course. It is not the only exception to the idea that bigger things, bigger organizations can keep using the same principles of organization. In fact, it is often true that at some magic stage of growth, the rules all change. For example in the Middle Ages people thought that children were merely miniature adults. There were no notions about "childhood." It is *so* clear to us now that this is untrue. We are quite aware of stages of growing up, and stages of religious understanding as well.

In Adam's time, if the mill owner asked for too much from a farmer, the farmer would find another mill or be put out of business, with the result that the mill owner would be without a client. It was clear in each transaction that there needed to be a balance.

Now, a fabulously paid executive, sometimes called the Company Hammer, might fire 10,000 employees and then get a bonus for cleaning out the company "dead wood." This isn't dead wood. It is people's lives. Where did we lose sight of it? The farmer wanted more money to support his family. That's a healthy self-interest. What can we say to a corporate CEO who wants millions in bonuses? And to the idea that stockholders matter more than employees?

I think when business was small, at the sole proprietor level, most people did care about those who worked for them. Most people I know, if they see suffering in a real person, do care. Put a face on the suffering, notice that it is a person with feelings and hopes and concerns just like our own, and most of us care. But, if it is just numbers, some unknown people in a distant place, people who do not seem not to be like "us," well, the balance gets creepy and we can lose track of who it costs, focusing only on how much money we saved.

A few years ago there was a big to-do when it was publicized that Kathie Lee Gifford, the former co-host with Regis on morning TV, was selling a line of clothes made in sweatshops. I had been pretty much oblivious to modern day sweatshops. Kathie Lee was a token, I suppose, but the resulting publicity did raise the bar. I think we now believe that a celebrity should be expected to know where her product was made and who was hurt in the process. And we have better access to finding out whether things are made using labor that is uncompensated. We still have to dig, it but some of the scales have dropped from our eyes.

Oh Oh!!! I took a break from writing, and this piece about the evils of big business and the plan of WalMart clones to take over the world has just been shape-shifted.

My daughter Marilyn and I had a conversation, and she asked why we U.U.s are so negative? It seems to her that we are *against* a lot of stuff. Why can't we be **FOR** things? Well, I could have argued with that for hours. We are *for* justice and equality. We are *for* the ones who are left out of the conversation. We are *for* the needs of those who can't speak out for themselves. *For* the poor who hold no power to bargain with. We are *for* the preservation of individual rights, which get lost inside of institutions, which lose sight of the worth and dignity of just plain folks.

But I also know what she was saying. And I understand her desire for church to be about something positive, rather than a discouraging doom-and-gloom rant. We come here to be fed as well as challenged.

Seven years ago I did some enneagram work, and I thought I caught a glimpse of part of my way of being in the world that had eluded me before. I am a seven on that scale, an optimistic dreamer-planner. I had such a need to see things as basically good, that I was pushing a lot of not-so-good things under the rug. So, with some deliberation, I moved to Berkeley and joined a Fellowship of ardent activists. My friend Hal there holds the record for civil disobedience arrests in Berkeley. (Now that is saying something.) I joined in conversations with every iconoclast I met and I have been consumed with what is wrong with the modern world and the United States of America in particular ever since.

Recently I read Guns, Germs and Steel by Jared Diamond about how it has been downhill since the development of agriculture, and Stephen Jay Gould, the evolutionary biologist's collections of essays Dinosaur in a Haystack, and I've been thinking about Norman Gottwald's analysis of ancient Israel, in which he says it has all been downhill since we stopped herding in the Mediterranean hills and came down into valleys and built villages. Hmmmm. That is a long line of "it used to be better"s. And in some ways it did.

When we lived in caves and died in our twenties, before we learned to use fire, we did not hurt the environment very much. Maybe each species was more nearly living out its own way on this small planet. But could I make a case for returning to the caves? There are not nearly enough caves, just for starters, and I would insist on a reading lamp and a down blanket for winter and popsicles in the summer. And I don't want my kids to be already past their lifetimes in their thirties.

And there does seem some kind of inevitability, if we like so much about our modern world, to the increased momentum toward big business and multinationals and a global market. Maybe the question changes from "How do we go back to more sole proprietorships and family farms?" to "How do we hold as sacred, at all times, the needs of the individuals *within* larger organizations?" Can we keep big corporations and big government alive to the concerns of individuals — particularly those who don't wield much power or control much wealth? (Which is saying the same thing.) Where are ethics and morality?

So, can I find ways to say what our work is about in ways that are positive? That is more about reaching toward good things than fighting against the evil?

As Adrienne Rich says, "There is so much I cannot heal." And I don't want my life to be about fighting. And fear. And hating "those people." That's what I most criticize when I hear it from those who are on the other side of the fence from me and my ideas. I am critical of those people for judging me. Where do I draw the line if I am merely judging them in return? I *do* want my life to be about "standing for something good."

There is another danger as we take on a new study, of getting caught up in, for instance, the greed of WalMart and how it busts unions, and doesn't pay its people enough to feed their families, and offers health care only to a small percentage of its workers, and uses its

immense system of stores to offer merchandise at less than cost until all the competition is dead and there is nowhere else to turn, and — according to a presentation I went to at General Assembly — actually deals directly with slavers for some of its products. There is little question in my mind that WalMart represents the worst of what “new business” is about. And it is masterful at presenting itself as deeply concerned about people and their communities.

When we take time to learn about all of its insidious practices, it is hard not to lose patience with those who still shop there. This is a terrible sword. It is imperative in restorative justice work that we do not become just the strident voice yelling in the wilderness. Justice work must come from our love of the others, not only our critical analysis. Easy to say. Very hard to do.

I am especially energized when I work “with” people and not “for” them. And I am so depleted and despairing when I work “against” them. I do get carried away with being “against” all too often. But it is not good for me, or the things I really love. Or good for finding peace in my own heart, which is the bedrock for doing the work of peace in the world.

So what kind of vision comes out of this? What kind of work with these economic issues do I feel called to today?

First, I am grateful for our principles and purposes. If you are a visitor here, they are printed in the front of our hymnal just a page before the first hymn, and there are copies available. Let me know if you would like one. They help me to find my way, and help me to check my present actions out against my larger purposes.

Here is a current list of things we can do:

1. We can commit to being in the conversation with those who are asking, “Who benefits?” Who is left behind? Whose voice is silenced?

I was originally for NAFTA. I thought trade across borders sounded good. I like the idea of world community. Why should we be richer than people in other countries, especially if we use their resources for our products? I did not understand that it weighted the interests of

huge businesses like Arthur Daniels Midland against the small farmer and drove people off their land. I didn't see that the cost of living would rise and so would the numbers of people out of work. I didn't begin to understand how carefully our agreements should be constructed with the interests of real people fairly represented in every conversation.

That's what the WTO protests are about. Not the trading per se, but the fact that no one from the working class has a way to be heard.

2. We need to keep choosing simplicity, to live as simply as we can and also be comfortable. Finding a balance here is to live in the question of "How much is enough?" We should make room for beauty and comfort, but it is not OK to choose more than enough, because it is *always* at someone's expense.

3. This is the piece that is really from our theology. We may try to find a particular thing that interests us, and try out a new way of consuming and make a commitment to it for a specified period of time. We cannot do it all, but we can trust the unfolding of our commitment and our learning. Step by step. The task is to stay awake. Keep learning. Keep listening and trust our instincts.

It is no different from the need of congregations to study and identify a just cause in the larger community. To work on just one or two needs, among the infinite that will present themselves. To make a commitment to work on that need. Then gather again to converse, share stories, learn, strategize, and then to recommit.

One of our common Unitarian Universalist flaws is that we find it so hard to choose, and so our work often does not take shape. Yet, we do know that all of life is interconnected. And to work on any oppression is to make some difference to all oppressions. Pick up the thread of one and we'll find ourselves tangled in the great mess of them all.

Let me suggest a Holiday audit as we begin this season of shopping and frantic activity. Look at this month. What activities on your calendar do you really look forward to? How many could be dropped, leaving time to be together, just really sharing the holidays with those you love? How many things will be bought because you have to buy *something*? What other

choices could you make? Perhaps IOUs for time together, doing something you both love? Spend less time being too busy and too tired. Spend less money on things that are only clutter. Look at the greater picture and keep choosing from the vision of how you want things to be. You can do it. Better than last year, whatever your last year was.

Do one thing and tell someone about it. Who can guess what that will awaken in someone else or where that could lead us?

The hardest part of the work is that we must keep changing. Keep changing. Keep changing. Listening for the new thing. Noticing the lost. Seeing what we haven't seen before. Loving others' needs as much as our own. Not allowing ourselves to find a permanent home. Foxes have holes; birds have nests, but human beings live best when they do not get stuck in one place.

Examine everything from your own loving heart.

Let me end with a word of appreciation for my friend Adam Smith, who got me started on this particular unraveling. Hurrah for Adam, he saw something new. He separated for the first time a study of economics and a conversation about ethics. He began to distinguish how wealth is accumulated and how it flows.

So, Brothers and Sisters, our work is not done. Let's do it together.