

A LARGER VIEW

*A Commentary On How Current Events Reflect—
Or Not—Our Spiritual Search*

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The Value of Government

--It's easy to be against taxes and against government, but Somalia can be a lesson—Now that we've paid our federal taxes, getting ready for the next round of property taxes, and in a state like California are being subjected to an increase in sales tax, it's easy to be angry and question the whole principle. Since it's logical to associate taxes with government the anger extends to both, government and taxes. It's politically expedient for some to try to capitalize on this anger whether or not they participated in the April 15th tea parties, and try to fight both the idea of taxes and that of government. And yet, at the same time that we read about those angry taxpayers we can also read about Somalia, a totally failed state, ruled by anarchy and breeding pirates, terrorists and several generations who have never known civil order of any kind. Despite the fact that it is an extreme and dire instance, it is nevertheless an example of what happens when there is no government and no taxes to make sure the government does what it is supposed to.

Let's hope we can learn from the lessons Somalia represents and apply it to our next round of protest against government and taxes.

The Value of Art

--The monetary value of certain artists may have gone down, but the value of their art remains--The economic crisis has hit the art world. Art prices have decreased by about 35%, particularly the work of postwar artists whose price tags had previously gone up along with the stock market. Andy Warhol is in that category. His portrait of Mick Jagger recently sold for \$1.1 million. The seller had bought it in 2006 for \$1.5 million. The work of old masters has, however, not gone down quite as steeply.

Does the value of art really depend on its price tag? Is Warhol less Warhol because his portrait of Mick Jagger sold for less? Is the painting less striking, interesting or unique? The price tag may make a collector feel good, even feed his or her ego. It may contribute to the investment potential of the art world, but it does not reflect the true value of art. Monetary value may be expedient in a world which no longer knows how to get along without money, but those of us who try to see to the core of things need to remember that monetary value and true value travel along different trajectories.

Access To Contraceptives: A Woman's Right?

--The correlation between family planning and development in the Third World is strong enough that it does lead one to ask if access to contraceptives ought not to be a human right-- For the last few decades "population projects", as they're called among development professionals, have been like ping pong balls bouncing according to the policies of U.S administrations and whether or not they were in agreement with the views of right to life activists on the subject. Meanwhile family planning and development in the Third World seem to underscore a correlation long known in academic and women's rights circles. The United Nations estimates there are some 200 million women in the world, mainly in developing countries, who have "an unmet need" for effective contraception. Demographers estimate that this unmet need leads to 70 to 80 million unwanted pregnancies each year, along with 150,000 maternal deaths and 19 million abortions—all of which could be changed through the availability of effective contraception.

President Obama has lifted the ban on aid for the Population Fund, and those running women's or health clinics are learning that to offer effective contraception is more than just giving women a pill or an IUD. Not only must the right method for them be available, they need counseling, follow up, and most of all to be treated with dignity—all reinforcing what many already know, that the education of women is a basis for development.

It may be that access to contraceptives ought to be a woman's right.

Planning the End of Hunger

--Idealistic as it may be, calling for the end of hunger is also a necessity--Heads of organizations often have plans, that's what they do, but when Jacques Diouf, the director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization, does so, his message is worth heeding. Concerned that the economic crisis is hitting the undernourished even more than in the past, seeing that the number of those chronically hungry has now topped one billion, he is proposing a solution. Let's put behind the UN Millennium goals to halve the number of undernourished by 2015 and instead let's work to eradicate hunger by 2025. He suggests we learn from past mistakes, particularly in the 1990's when agriculture investment sharply fell, which he says paved the way for the surge in food prices over the last two and half years. To pursue his ideas he proposes a world leaders summit in Rome next November to tackle the issue of food insecurity. In 2008, thirty countries suffered food riots. Food insecurity is a political as well as human rights issue, and looking ahead is important on all levels. Let's hope M. Diouf succeeds.

The Right to Sanitation

--The lack of basic sanitation is hidden problem--It's hard to talk about certain things, but not talking make them worse. It's true for certain feelings, certain problems and in this case, open defecation. The World Water Forum is meeting In Istanbul and several others have already mentioned how not talking about this basic sanitation problem is costing lives since it literally is an open invitation to many diseases. One in five people in the world does not have access to what it would take for them not to be forced into open defecation. The problem would be so easily preventable when one considers that for each dollar spent in installing basic sanitation \$9 would be saved on health costs, lost wages and sicknesses. In some areas women have to wake up before dawn and defecate under the darkness of open fields making themselves targets for rape and other attacks. In densely populated areas people defecate in plastic bags which are thrown into rivers and other places where pollution accumulates. The underlying problem is poor water or no access to water at all. In 2002 the number of deaths attributed to poor water, sanitation and hygiene was over 3.5 million. Over 94% of diarrhea cases which kills more than 1.4 million children a year would be preventable if basic sanitation existed.

We can put our bathrooms on our list of what to be grateful for, but we must do more than that, we must educate ourselves so that we can educate others that this problem be no longer hidden. Even more crucial, we must join those who call for water—and sanitation—to be declared a basic human right.

Website of Interest: www.refunite.org

Although there are those who think Facebook as a site is not as constructive as it could be, even they would have to agree with the constructiveness of www.refunite.org for it uses the Facebook technology to help refugees find family members and friends. It is absolutely free and confidential and bypasses governmental organizations, meaning people who may illegally be in a country can still avail themselves of the site's services without fear of being turned in. The registration can include pet names, information

known only between the people involved, special markings. The people being found of course need to be able to use the site as well. Still many have been able to find family members already, and as the site becomes known it is hoped many more will be able to locate loved ones. The Red Cross, along with other groups working with refugees, facilitates these searches. The need is huge, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states that there are over 1.5 million children who have lost contact with their parents. While it may not be a site an average reader may use, it is a site that makes one feel good about both the world and technology.

To Ponder On

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Mother Teresa

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