

The Role of Voluntary Poverty and Religion in Meeting the Ecological/Economic Crisis

What is the greatest gift?

By Mary Oliver

What is the greatest gift?

Could it be the world itself- the oceans, the meadowlark,  
the patience of the trees in the wind?

Could it be love, with its sweet clamor of passion?

Something else- something else, entirely  
holds me in thrall.

That you have life that I wonder about  
more than I wonder about my own.

That you have a life-courteous, intelligent-  
that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.

That you have a soul-your own, no one else's-  
that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own.

So that I find my soul clapping its hands for yours, more than my own.<sup>1</sup>

As the years have unfolded I have seen the destruction of our environment, and the ecological/ethical ravages of this creation. I now see more vividly the correlation between economic inequalities and the environment's unraveling. As I pursued more understanding of this corollary process, I encountered the writings of theologian Sallie McFague. Her ideas of "voluntary poverty" inspired me and made sense to me. That was in 2011 and I have been following her since. We have written and she has been gracious in reviewing some of my work so it only seems proper to end my studies at the seminary exploring her ideas more deeply and presenting my own thoughts on this important topic.

It is also clearer to me that the role of religion in addressing this

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, "What is the Greatest Gift?" In *Red Bird: Poems by Mary Oliver* (Boston: Beacon, 2008) Kindle Edition, 257.

ecological/economic crisis is both challenging and necessary. The religions of our churches, synagogues, mosques, and meeting halls, as well as our universities, and seminaries, have a significant voice in this conversation. As I have taken to the pulpit these past few years, first as a deacon, and now as a priest, I understand the use of authority in educating and informing, in sharing alternatives to perceptions, in challenging cultural bias, and in offering contemplation within theological, ethical, and scriptural contexts. Specifically, as a foundation for this thesis, the ancient wisdom of Hebrew and Christian scripture can help unfold praxis, precedent, and a model of self-emptying love, beginning with the ancients of the Book of Exodus, the prophets, to Jesus of Nazareth, and the Pauline theology of mutuality and reciprocal care. Further, each of the world's religions can inform and guide us as we face this ecological/economic crisis. More than ever, our pulpits and meeting halls are charged with an enormous and sobering challenge; yet this is an opportunity that can truly change minds, hearts, and spirits. If we are not relevant, how can we bring God to the kitchen table of our lives and feed one another, both spiritually and literally? Poet David Whyte writes with directness, about our hunger, in his poem "Loaves and Fishes":

This is not the age of information. This is not the age of information.

Forget the news and the radio and the blurred screen.

This is the time of loaves and fishes.

People are hungry, and one good word is bread for a thousand.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Whyte, "Loaves and Fishes," *Crossing the Unknown Sea, Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 186.

Dr. Sallie McFague takes on this challenge. She is an Ecological Theologian, the Distinguished Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia, and the Carpenter Professor of Theology Emeritus at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She has written extensively on her Metaphorical Theology and more recently the effects of climate change and consumerism on the world. She calls attention to the middle class of North America, which constitutes a large percentage of the “20 percent of the world’s population, who use 80 percent of the world’s resources,”<sup>3</sup> providing insight into what this middle class can do to help our planet. Her work is focused on this population of North America because we have considerable influence, power, and money, both private and public, which can combine to bring large-scale reform to economic disparity, replacing systems of injustice with equity. So too, the Apostle Paul, found inequity in the wealthy one percent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century people of Corinth, Greece. Like the ancients, we are challenged to let go of our attachments for the welfare of others. And, like the ancients, we are rich in possibility to do so much good.

Soup kitchens have their place, but there is a deeper urgency: by advocating for legislation and changes in policy that would effect many more, and we could unearth the roots of the real toxicity, and provide the antidotes. The challenge is massive. As of 2014, nearly 50 million American people live in officially defined poverty, a rate higher than

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<sup>3</sup>Sallie McFague, “A Manifesto to North American Middle-Class Christians” in *Moral Ground, Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, eds. (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 2010), 244.

the 1960s, both a disturbing number and trend marker.<sup>4</sup> More than 2.2 billion people in the world live on less than two US dollars a day, which is the average poverty line in developing countries, and a common measurement of deep deprivation.<sup>5</sup> The World Health Organization has said that poverty is the greatest killer of humanity.<sup>6</sup> Chilean theologian Pablo Richard writes with a haunting and certain pathos, “there is a wall in the Third World, hiding the poor, so poverty does not annoy the powerful, and the poor die in silence.”<sup>7</sup> Not all suffering is equal. Poverty becomes embodied in the poor.

In addition, the “financialization”<sup>8</sup> of the US financial market has undermined shared prosperity for all. It has positioned finance as the driving force, politically and economically, thus marginalizing the many for the gain of the few, both corporately and individually. “The 400 richest people in the United States have more wealth than the

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<sup>4</sup> Gar Alperovitz, “The Political-Economic Foundations of a Sustainable System,” Chapter 18, *State of the World 2014, Governing for Sustainability*, Project Directors, Tom Prugh and Michael Renner (Washington, DC, Island Press, Worldwatch Institute, 2014), 193.

<sup>5</sup> “2015 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics”, *Hunger Notes* (Washington, D.C:World Hunger Education Service).<<https://www.worldhunger.org/.../world%20huger>> [accessed March, 2015]

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Diana Swancut, *Jesus and Paul on Poverty and Economic Justice*, Hartford Seminary, class notes on Paulo Freire, February 8, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas I. Palley, “Making Finance Serve the Real Economy,” *State of the World 2014*, 176.

<sup>9</sup> [money.cnn.com/2013/09/25/news/economy/income-inequality/](http://money.cnn.com/2013/09/25/news/economy/income-inequality/). Richard Reich, “How Income Inequality Hurts America,” Sep. 25, 2013.[accessed March, 2015]

<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.inequalityforall.com/>> Richard Reich, *Inequality For All*, film by Richard Reich, Jacob Kornbluth Director, 2013 Sundance Film Festival. Distributed by RADIUS-TWC, Fall in 2013. [accessed March, 2015]

bottom 150 million put together," said Berkeley Professor and former Labor Secretary Robert Reich on a recent CNN Money panel addressing income inequality.<sup>9</sup> In *Inequality for All*,<sup>10</sup> a 2013 documentary film, Reich, argues that income inequality is the defining issue for the United States. He states that 95 percent of economic gains in the US have accrued to the top 1 percent wealthiest Americans, since 2009 when the recovery allegedly started. At the heart of the film is a simple question: *What is a good society and what role does the widening income gap play in the deterioration of the nation's economic health?*<sup>11</sup>

Through our consumerism we pay homage to Wall Street. We make money, the god of possibility and the American Dream, and we pray that the vending machine god will give us what we want. But it just does not satisfy the heart. It runs through us. It is not an equitable exchange for the needs of love, belonging, living a meaningful life, and the satisfaction of true giving.

Robert Putnam, Harvard social scientist and professor of public policy, recently authored, *Our Kids, The American Dream in Crisis*. He writes poignantly about the "opportunity gap and growing income inequality," specifically in "lower-class families compared to the expanding resources available to upper-class parents."<sup>12</sup> His conclusion is that economic disparity increases opportunity disparity and that causes a crisis for all. He points out that the effect of the devastation and trauma of the lower one third of Americans creeps at a painstaking pace. Much like climate change and global warming,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Putman, *Our Kids, The American Dream Crisis*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2014), Kindle Edition, 600.

the changes take place over years, such that paying attention is lessened and the causal effects seep insidiously into the future. Putnam believes that a decade from now, returns from his research will reveal a decline in socioeconomic mobility of the younger and less privileged generation. The family, educational, and community supports that once boosted children from all backgrounds up the ladder of success, will no longer serve poorer children so well, and that makes for class segregation and depravity that effects all of society.

Most of those who are not poor know little about how the other half lives because of class segregation. Therefore our empathy suffers and our social policies create barriers to others' success. Moreover, our economy, democracy, and our collective values suffer. This crisis of injustice is growing at the global level too.<sup>13</sup> The global corollary is documented in the 2013 report by the United Nations. It relies on the work of economist Joseph Stiglitz: "... that growing income inequality is responsible for all manner of political instability, as well as for the slowing of economic growth worldwide."<sup>14</sup> The emergence of economic inequality and its unscrupulous effects are clear. How to read the signs and approach solutions remains in debate.

Dr. McFague offers a compelling way to read the signs and fashion solutions. She sees the world and the cosmos as the Body of God, a metaphor that urges us to care for the planet, as if it were God's body. When one part suffers, all suffer. Her use of a metaphorical theology allows the believer to make use, among other things, of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 3656

<sup>14</sup> Jill Leore, "Richer and Poorer, Accounting for Inequality," *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2015, [accessed March 22, 2015]

parables of Jesus, allegories, comparing and contrasting and familiar metaphor. She believes that our planet is in peril, and like so many climatologists, environmentalists, sociologists, and scholars of ethics, she sees ecological degradation and poverty coupled together. According to the UNDP, United Nations Development Programs, developing countries suffer 99 percent of the ill effects of climate change.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Inuit hunters of the Canadian Arctic can no longer rely on predictable animal migrations, as warmer temperatures affect local ecosystems. “Hundred-year floods” are occurring every few years in temperate climates. Two billion people living in the dryland environments, 90 percent of which live in developing countries, have witnessed so-called no-fail farming techniques that fail, year after year. In arid regions like East Africa, rainfall has increased in intensity, with alternate droughts, causing both flooding and erosion. Those living in the coastal areas have seen a higher intensity and higher frequency of storms, causing evacuations and economic distress both privately and publicly. The coastal regions of developing countries have seen the creation of thousands of climate refugees: displaced, they are often considered burdens on more “stable” communities.<sup>16</sup>

“We now know that we may be approaching the tipping point when out-of-control global temperature increases will change life on planet Earth beyond our imaginings.”<sup>17</sup> Because global warming is the result of energy consumption, especially the burning of fossil fuels- - coal, gas, and oil-- we have managed to raise the planet’s

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<sup>15</sup> Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, (Minneapolis, MN. Fortress Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, 600.

<sup>16</sup> Aaron Sachs, “Looking Backward (Not Forward) to Environmental Justice,” in *State of the World 2014*, 109.

<sup>17</sup> McFague, “A Manifesto to North American Middle-Class Christians,” in *Moral Ground*, 245.

temperature 1-degree F. Without ending or reducing the use of fossil fuels, temperatures will rise 5 to 6 degrees higher by century's end. Therefore, we have effectively ended the Holocene era; the ten thousand years of climatic stability that allowed human society to establish itself and to flourish.<sup>18</sup>

“We face an unprecedented global challenge. We, humanity, and predominantly the rich developed countries have imposed upon ourselves, nothing less than a planetary crises. Planetary boundaries are critical biophysical boundaries that we need to stay within to avoid unacceptable environmental change with serious potentially disastrous effects for society.”<sup>19</sup>

Climate change is just one of nine markers, or “planetary life support systems” that support human life and survival. Within the boundaries there is a safe operating space for human civilization to thrive and grow for generations to come, if we move together, simultaneously, globally.<sup>20</sup> When human activity causes the boundary to be crossed or breached, the particular ecosystem tips over and becomes locked in an undesirable state, affecting all ecosystems. Currently, we have breached or are approaching a breach, of four of the nine interconnected planetary boundaries; global nitrogen cycles, biodiversity loss and extinction, ocean acidification, and climate change: the remaining systems are land use, freshwater, ozone depletion, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosols.<sup>21</sup> “We are in a phase where transformative change is necessary;

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<sup>18</sup> Bill McKibben, “Something Braver Than Trying to Save the World,” in *Moral Ground*, 175.

<sup>19</sup> <<https://www. Planetary Boundaries and Human Opportunities, Stockholm Resilience Centre TV, Johan Rockstrom>>, [accessed March 22, 2015]

<sup>20</sup> <[https://www.ted.com/talks/johan\\_rockstrom\\_language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/johan_rockstrom_language=en)> *Planetary Boundaries*, Johan Rockstrom, [accessed March 4, 2015]

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

we can no longer continue doing nothing.” (Rockstrom, 2014)<sup>22</sup> Humanity is a force for change at the planetary scale that can provide sustainable growth and development within a stable earth system. The resilience of any self-contained system including the human body is a measure of allowing the system to disturb and probe it’s boundaries. For example, forests are more resilient if they are submitted to storms, fires and pollution. They adapt and change but stay within the critical thresholds.<sup>23</sup> “Crises can precede opportunity.”<sup>24</sup> If we move together, simultaneously as a whole, creating adaptive, persistent, transformative, sustainable governance we can make a difference. The shift in mindset is essential.

The challenge is one of responsibility and accountability to our earthly neighbors and the planet itself, to do what we can, to create sustainable growth and development for humanity. For those who are aware, animated, and inspired, there is much to be done. On an individual level, we strive to do what we can, by the demands of our conscience. On a community level, we can participate in groups, organizations, social media, charities, and we can lobby for new policies in an attempt to stave off current trends. On a religious and faith level, we can begin to create a creation story and theology that speaks profoundly of the current reality, the “planet as the Body of God that is suffering, a new incarnation

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Walker, <<https://www.stockholmresilience.org/>>Stockholm Resilience Center, Stockholm University, 2014. [accessed March 22, 2015]

<sup>24</sup>Johan Rockstrom, from the *Stockholm Resilience Center*, and Will Steffen from the *Australian National University*, in collaboration with 26 leading academics have researched and reported the current science of planetary boundaries. Their work was published in a special edition of *Nature*, after their presentation in 2009 to the General Assembly of the *Club of Rome*.

theology.”<sup>25</sup>

In this model, we see through the practices, life, and self-emptying of Jesus, in service to others, that the relationship of God with the world is rooted in self-giving or “kenotic character.”<sup>26</sup> We are asked to do the same. Therefore, we no longer have dominion over other species; rather, we are and must be in service to them as shepherds of care, and carry responsibility for all life forms. We are interdependent and we bear accountability. Our inner summons needs congruity with outer ecology. We are part of an interconnected macrocosm in need of just and sustainable ecosystems that benefit the entire Earth. Each person has a mind that is complex, with more neuro-synaptic connections than there are stars in the universe, a creative force. Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, Harvard brain scientist, concludes from her own lived experience of a left hemisphere stroke, “We now know through the science of the brain that our minds and bodies are porous and boundaries between us are nonexistent. We are no longer considered separate from everything and anything.”<sup>27</sup> She also writes that because the circuitry of the brain’s right hemisphere is devoted to deep inner peace and compassion, the more time we spend running this circuitry, the more we project this inner peace/compassion into the world. The more we understand how to make these right hemisphere choices, Taylor notes, the more we can work as collaborators and members of the human family.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, 4106.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4141.

<sup>27</sup> Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*. (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 154, 168-169.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.

Our future is in our hands, perhaps for the first time in our 45 million centuries. We have a will that can move us towards action. We can care for others, for our future, for our planet, and for those who will come after us, or not. It comes down to this challenge: can we live differently? If we see that we are the body of God, we need to look deeply at what really is. There are parts that are suffering deeply. We need a new paradigm of relationality that can speak to the current crises. The contextual narrative of liberation theologian Choan Seng Song, Professor of Theology and Asian culture speaks prophetically. “Christian theology is a biography of God from the perspective of the Christian faith. It is an effort to give an account of God against the background of the Christian traditions. It is an attempt to let God speak for God’s self on the basis of what Christians perceive to be signs of God activity in human community. If theology is a biography of God, there must be as many theologians as biographies of God. *This is one of the most exciting discoveries of our day.*”<sup>29</sup> And as such it is one of the most disturbing revelations, as well. What kind of theology are we revealing in the ways we live?

In order for the historical Jesus to have any meaning in our lives, his teachings must act as guides for our behavior: “Love your neighbor,” “Love your enemies,” and the parables of “The Good Samaritan,” and “The Prodigal Son,” coupled with the “Sermon on the Mount.” These are descriptions for our ethical and moral decision-making. These are the mindful choices that inhabit our individual, relational, political, spiritual, social, and ecological characters. If we take God seriously, we change, and the

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<sup>29</sup> George C.L. Cummings and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds. “Slave Narratives, Black Theology of Liberation (USA) and the Future” in, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue, Black Theology in the Slave Narrative*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 104.

sacred becomes a reality.<sup>30</sup> This is our challenge, to connect the scriptural dots to the heart of our lives, our loaves and fish's hunger, and the reality of the suffering body of God. The truth is we are all at different levels of moral, cognitive and social development. Yet in the pews, we all sit, from the very simple to the most sophisticated and aware. To echo the words and provocative expression, "speaking truth to power," this then is our call.<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. spoke passionately about such things.

"Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about the social, political and economic change. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love." "Where Do We Go From Here?"<sup>32</sup>

That is the seminal question.

In her current book, *Blessed Are the Consumers, Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, Dr. McFague probes these issues and calls for a "radically different lifestyle, one of restraint, sharing, limits, sacrifice and even death."<sup>33</sup> She sees a new paradigm of relationality, invested in a theology and praxis that can address the ecological and economic mountains of this century. Her kenotic theology, based on the self-emptying of God, is the basis for her work, in what she terms "voluntary poverty,"

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<sup>30</sup> Marcus J. Borg, and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Speak Truth to Power, A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence, A Study of International Conflict*, prepared for the American Friends Service Committee, March 2, 1955 <[https://www.afsc.org/...Speak\\_Truth\\_to\\_Power](https://www.afsc.org/...Speak_Truth_to_Power)>, [accessed March, 2015]

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "Where do we go from Here." Delivered to the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Southern Christian Leadership Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967. <[https://www.mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/.../where\\_do\\_we...](https://www.mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/.../where_do_we...)> [accessed January, 2015]

<sup>33</sup>Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, Kindle Edition, 4165.

where we begin to “stand in the shoes of the poor and to provide a deep degree of empathy with the suffering of others so that our circle of concern becomes radically inclusive.”<sup>34</sup> Her approach is more invitational than dogmatic, more paradigmatic than programmatic.

In kenotic theology, according to Dr. McFague, we are imitators of God, a God who loves deeply and intimately. This is a body theology that stems from needs, God’s and ours. To give further substance, Paul’s doctrine of reciprocal care and mutuality, “count others better than yourself,” his 11<sup>th</sup> commandment, in imitation of Christ, together with McFague’s theology, lays the foundation and precedent for this ethical stance of doing and giving to others.<sup>35</sup> We are called to find our way, as stewards of God’s economy, into this ethical chasm of those who have much and those who have little to nothing.

Paul likens the whole faith community, the Body of Christ, to a plant in which each one is a valuable and irreplaceable part of the whole. Our ability and desire to give to each other what the other needs, and our ability to receive what we need, express a reciprocity and mutuality in relationship that keeps the plant flourishing. The plant is not thriving when we are not caring for each other, and then we all suffer. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is clear (2:5-8):

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but

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<sup>34</sup>McFague, Follow-up email to the Dalai Lama, Matthew Ricard, Daniel Goleman, Joan Halifax et cetera. Proceeding Dharmasala, India Conference on “Ecology, Ethics Interdependence.” Primary source read in *The Vancouver Sun*, Vancouver, British Columbia, November 8, 2011. <<https://www.vancouversun.com>>. [accessed November, 2011].

<sup>35</sup> Swancut, February 8, 2012.

emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.”

Kenosis therefore, concerns the exchange of love, not just in Jesus the prototype, but also in the world as God’s body. We are the body of the world, created in God’s image, receiving and giving, and now as that body we are facing a complex twenty-first-century world. Our present times demand an eco-theology that is sensitively nuanced, to include the reality of interdependence and interrelatedness of every creature within every system on the planet.<sup>36</sup>

Given all the excesses that denote this world, kenosis is compelling in its potential meaning. It can be life altering, in what it asks of us. “To find one’s life one must lose it.” (Matthew 10:39) Capitalism and the free market have generated and created generational wealth, estate and inheritance laws, offshore holdings that are nontaxable, and tax loopholes, all of which enable wealth to accumulate and pass through select hands without a hint of loss. For the working poor, capitalism and the free market offer less reward. Low and stagnant wages at \$7.25 per hour, amounts to \$15,000 per year for someone who works 40 hours a week, hardly a windfall. Unemployment, poor education, racial and gender discrimination, combined with and cheaper labors abroad, paint a portrait of scarcity and urgency. The “have-nots” are relegated to the scraps, left by a trickle-down economics that is fantasy: it does not exist. This ideological and political economics feeds no one at the bottom. Top hedge-fund managers now make over \$1 million per hour and 95 percent of all US economic gains go to the top 1 percent.<sup>37</sup> Have

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<sup>36</sup>McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, 317.

we managed to wall off our psyches and selectively attend only to what makes us comfortable?

King Hezekiah of Judea, a pious man, loved by God, is challenged in a profound and life-altering visit by a delegation, messengers, from the King of Babylon. In Isaiah 39: 5-8, the prophet insightfully points out that this visit was an opportunity for Hezekiah to speak of the power and immensity of God, as he had just recovered from a near-death illness. Instead, he “cordially” invested in burnishing the riches and legacy left by his ancestors. In so doing, Hezekiah revoked the fulfillment of the prophecies, which set him up as unifier and redeemer of God’s people. A man of great faith, he still had not met the test of making riches subservient to God. However, when he reached awareness of what he had done, he was indeed pious and accepting, and saw God’s word as “good.” Is that not what we hope for? Can the top 1 percent hear and accept, that what they cling to, will be “carried away to Babylon?” Their wealth cannot bring unity and equity, peace and security, which we so desperately need.

Scripture abounds with the have-nots experiencing the compassion of Jesus. Mark 1: 40-45 tells us: “A person with leprosy approached Jesus, knelt down and begged, ‘If you are willing, you can heal me.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out a hand, touched the person with leprosy, and said, ‘I am willing. Be cleansed.’ Micah 6:8 instructs us: “He has told you, O mortal what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” These are the scriptural links between justice and love, the characteristics and virtues that Jesus embodied, the cornerstones of the “Jesus movement,”<sup>38</sup> and the work of Paul. These

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<sup>37</sup>Reich.

<sup>38</sup> Swancut, February 19, 2012.

values speak loudly of healing, abundant life, life that feeds the soul, the mind and body. This is the cornerstone of voluntary poverty.

The Psalms were codified over a long period of time and became the main body of literature for the people of Israel. It told their story and their relationship with God. The Psalms were pivotal to the emerging Jesus movement, sung and digested; they had huge importance in structuring and retelling the story of the Israelites. They were melodic histories making memory a living thing.<sup>39</sup> As in the African Spirituals, their living history was elevated to encourage hope and perseverance, because it points towards a new place with higher authority, a place with God. There, dignity and integrity would be sacred and upheld. This heritage belongs to the poor, the homeless, the voiceless, and to us all.

In speaking of voluntary poverty, McFague uses the term *kenosis* (self-emptying), and two other terms - - “wild space” and “universal self.” These indicate practices that stand-alone, and at the same time are parts of the larger process: intent on expanding our awareness of others and cultivating compassion and mindfulness for the good of others. The process of paying attention to others who suffer involuntary poverty is the crucible of these practices. It is a waking up, shaking us out of complacency and thrusting us into disorientation, confusion, and an uncomfortable state. Aptly named the “wild space,” it is where we find ourselves engaged with all that is unfamiliar: to our culture, to our way of living, and to our attachment to ego or self-fulfillment. A shift takes place, an internal disorientation and clash of world-views and something loosens within us: we find ourselves engaged and paying attention to those who suffer. We begin to understand and empathize, and very gradually there is a summons from within and we are drawn to

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

cultivating persistent practices or actions equivalent to our own voluntary poverty. By living a new way based on simplicity, restraint, sharing, and compassion,<sup>40</sup> we offer solidarity so that all living creatures can live. Gradually we become less egocentric and more eco-centric. The world as God's body is our body; therefore we are part of everyone and everything in the cosmos. Nothing stands alone. This then is the birthing of the "universal self," which brings personal transformation with global implications and relevance.

Mahatma Gandhi lived as the universal self: he was engaged in doing "good" for others, the highest moral law. His "insatiable love" for human kind and search for truth was his life's work. In that search, he saw that the rich needed to practice restraint, thus acting as "trustees" holding their riches on behalf of the poor.<sup>41</sup> Yet at the same time he saw that the poor had cooperated with the rich of society and that through non-violence they needed to learn how to free themselves from the degrading inequalities. He saw that the "absence of starvation among the masses" was the measure of a well ordered society. For Gandhi, poverty could be addressed only when everyone takes only their fair share, limiting their needs and sharing their resources: "Live simply so others might simply live." Truly he was the message: - - his life, his thoughts, his actions, born of integrity and congruity. He and his wife became the words, "be the change that one wants to see in the world." His desire was that all of creation be respected and honored so we could live in harmony with our environment.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, 60.

<sup>41</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers, Autobiographical Reflections*, Compiled and ed. Krishna Kripalani, (New York: Continuum, 2002) 125.

Voluntary poverty is a change in how we live on the planet. What each of us does here affects people everywhere. Saints who actually lived self-emptying lives gives us a dynamic model; their inspiring stories and biographies are critical pedagogy. Their rigor enabled connection to all sentient beings, the becoming of the universal self. Radical self-emptying love is the same as radical self-emptying giving. One cannot be full of oneself and have room for others. Voluntary poverty advocates a change in how we live and act in the world. It asks us to give up all manner of excess and privilege, both personal and economic. This model is a new paradigm that calls for a deep creative refurbishing of how we think, act, and cooperate with one another. From local to global, this paradigm offers more than a catchy phrase: it could be the way forward.

Liberation theology urges “con-sciencetization,” or “consciousness-raising.”<sup>43</sup> a process that can lead us to paying attention, especially to the plight of the poor. The work of Gustavo Gutierrez in particular, “preferential option for the poor”<sup>44</sup> has much to say about the oppression of the poor and “structural sin.” He writes,

“The ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in the social analysis we use, or in human compassion, or in any direct experience we ourselves may have of poverty. These are all doubtless valid motives that play an important part in our commitment. As Christians, however, our commitment is grounded, in the final analysis, in the God of our faith. It is a theocentric,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>43</sup> Swancut, February 8, 2012

<sup>43</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation, History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), Kindle Edition, 306.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 339.

prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love.”<sup>45</sup>

In Exodus 23, there is no “preferential option for the poor.” Rather it lists laws and rules, as deontological ethics, which are focused on the virtues of fairness, non-partiality, respect, and compassion. The underlying assumption was that community care or “hospitality” would serve those who had no family and were in need. Laws were created to help regulate the tribes and the nation, so that there was substance for everyone. Provisions were made for the poor; they were cared for without the burden of feeling shame.<sup>46</sup> There were no walls surrounding them, no need to hide, no attempt to ostracize or marginalize. But today, we live within different assumptions: our economics of the unrestrained wealthy and powerful, is systemically structured to favor the top-down oppression of the many.

Dr. Paul Farmer, Physician and Specialist, founder of Partners in Health, works in Haiti, Peru, Siberia, Rwanda, Burundi, to name just a few countries. His work and personal intimate experiences point to the development of the universal self. Since the 2010 earthquake in Haiti he has evolved radically and continues to do so. I heard him lecture at Yale Divinity School in May 2011, and his witness indicates that he is more than a doctor of the people. He is a doctor of the body, as in the body of the world, and the body of God. I sensed him to be a very patient and faith-filled man, giving substance to corporal acts of mercy and working towards radical change and shifts in the intertwined economic and healthcare systems and structures. Pharmaceuticals, non-profits, for-profit organizations, as well as governments providing aid, all ask: What is

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cost effectiveness? The underlying theme: what is the worth and value of the poor measured against the cost effectiveness of treatments and drugs? He saw exploitation and the structural power as control over others. We need different structures if we are to have just and sustainable lives. This is exactly what he is creating with Partners in Health, providing healthcare that cares for all.

Those like Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, who have worked feverishly to empty themselves for the good of others, suffering ridicule and oppression, always point towards social injustices. Our privileged ways mete out daily injustices to the poor, and our exceptionalism, as a way of seeing ourselves, is a means of exploitation of others. John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day have been intimate partners and companions in shaping and defining the work of Sallie McFague, providing life-giving and life-affirming insights.

The French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, said philosophy is the study of the “wisdom of love.” He suggests a provocative course and direction that McFague uses to reference the study of the saints. In her work she quotes him as writing, “Goodness consists in taking up a position in being, such that the Other counts more than myself.”<sup>47</sup> a familiar Pauline doctrine. What Levinas suggests lies at the heart of the saintly life, moving from ontology to ethics as the “first philosophy.” It is a move from describing human existence primarily in terms of being to the term of action: “Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. To ‘be’ a human being is not based on sheer

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<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *From Ethics and Infinity Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, [hermitmusic.tripod.com/levinas\\_ethics](http://hermitmusic.tripod.com/levinas_ethics), translated by Richard A Cohen, [accessed March 2015].

existence (with a presumed hierarchy of power as the measure of value), but rather to 'be' a human being is to respond to the Other as other."<sup>48</sup>

Woolman, Weil, and Day, represent an actual incarnation of this criterion; they portray the reduction of the ego and the fulfillment of the self through sacrificing for others. Each moved from ethics as language *about* the good, to the ethics as embodiment *of* the good, from thought to action. They consistently put themselves in positions of extreme precarity, to increase their solidarity with others and to shape the relevancy of their actions. They became what they were paying attention to. They lived on the planet in such a way that they became the embodiment of the universal self. They were not miracle workers, rather altruists, who through a lifelong process of ego reduction and attention to the other, came to incarnate radical, self-emptying for the good of others. Lives lived in service of the other challenges our own lives in ways that are more difficult to rationalize.

I believe people are responsible to one another. We are moved towards others and others move us: reciprocity takes place. For Lévinas, the human face "orders and ordains" us. It calls the subject into "giving and serving" the "Other." Through the face, certain poverty is revealed. This particular face forbids a reduction to "Sameness" and, simultaneously, installs a responsibility for the "Other" in the Self.<sup>49</sup>

The face of the other, in this sense, looms above the other person and traces "where God passes", God, the Infinite. The face's expression, moreover, carries with it this combination of resistance and defenselessness. The face of the "Other" is "widow,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

orphan, or stranger.”<sup>50</sup> If we did not build a wall of shame around the widow, orphan and stranger, the poor of the world, perhaps we could see for the very first time, and encounter the “Other” with compassion. Perhaps we would not find ourselves looking away or beyond, or rationalize that “the poor we will always have with us.” When we move from a specific “face to face” encounter we are opened and the experience is difficult to ignore. The encounter can teach us and perhaps even transform us, if we allow it, a rendering of the sacred. Ironically, the wry theology and ethics of Stephen Colbert are wildly pertinent. He says,

“If this is going to be a Christian nation (I would say, a nation of pluralism) that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it.”<sup>51</sup>

Is it that we just don't see the relevance of the teachings of Jesus, or is it that we just aren't that much into him? Colbert's teleological ethics challenge our faith, our thinking, and our choices about the good life for all.

Christian ethics entails is a progressive moral development, beginning in infancy and flourishing with the generative stage. Moving from the necessity of self-centeredness or ego-centered self, and then towards self-awareness and an awareness of an authority greater than ourselves, we then open into a new wakefulness of an interconnectedness with all of creation, culminating in self-giving towards the “other” a self-emptying or “kenosis.” This transformation and cultivation of compassion and empathy models the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His teachings, which were considered radical and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> <[http:// www.thecolbertreport.cc.com/also](http://www.thecolbertreport.cc.com/also)>. Stephen Colbert, About.com Political Humor, [accessed January, 2015].

countercultural at the time, remain today just as controversial and difficult to integrate and fully inhabit. To lose ourselves in order to find our authentic selves, I believe, is the core of the Christian ethical worldview, the kenotic theology of Dr. McFague: we empty the self in order to be filled with the grace of the “other.”

Again I ponder the sobering question from Martin Luther King, Jr. : “Where do we go from here?” How do we live inclusively with a new relational paradigm that is other-centered? The voice of voluntary poverty offers restraint that is long overdue: simplicity that is refreshing; and common-sense sharing where I take less, and use less, so others can eat, pay their bills, and live. On every level of our lives we can do with less so others have more. The real connection and substance that makes voluntary poverty possible are empathy and compassion.

I have often thought that when Jesus cured the blind, his sight became less. When he cured the sick, his body was less strong. When the energy of his presence left his body and poured itself into another, he felt it leave. The vessel was emptying. His death was approaching.

And so it is with us. We give ourselves away to family and friends: a homeless stranger on the corner, the addict at the supermarket, the dog who is lost, the bird who is starving, the wild who are displaced, the forest that is defoliated, the ocean that is polluted, and the coral reef that cannot sustain itself. After millions of centuries of differentiation, survival of the creative and adaptive fit, impulses that bring fresh thought and discoveries beyond imagining, and now at this precipice, we are witnessing a pristine evolutionary process that can dissolve in a decade or two or three. Forty-five million

centuries of life and now this time, the time of humankind, anthropocene time, is wielding its clout.

Leonardo Boff, Brazilian Liberation theologian, speaks of the poor as those who suffer injustice. Their poverty is produced by mechanisms of impoverishment and exploitation. The trees cut down for another parking lot, the polar bear caught in a dissolving Arctic melt, a Haitian running from the wilds of a broken dam because those who live upstream want more; these are the faces, the “other.” The quest: to live safely within the planetary boundaries, “to live simply, so others may live” to empty ourselves, to live as shepherds and sustainers of the body of God with justice, compassion, and mindful consciousness.

How can the restraint and compassion of Sallie McFague speaks of <sup>52</sup> manifest and birth a radically inclusive love that extends to all people and the planet?

“If God is understood not to be a substance but the active, creative love at work in the entire universe, then “loving God” is not something in addition to loving the world, but rather is the acknowledgement that in loving the world, one is participating in the planetary process, of self emptying love at all levels...a way of loving our neighbor, a process in which God’s own self may be seen at work.”<sup>53</sup>

What does a good society look like? It has no walls or gates of shame. No one is

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<sup>52</sup> McFague, *Blessed Are The Consumers*, 76

<sup>53</sup> Ibid; 137-138.

above or below any other human being. And all of creation is respected and cared for as God's sacred body. For some this may seem simplistic, wishful thinking or non-scholarly, but for me it is worth long and hard thought, and everything begins with a thought, an impulse. "The word was made flesh."

"We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Martin Luther King Jr. Christmas Eve sermon, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA, 1967