When Things Fall Apart
Compassion and Justice — What Then?

This is a talk from the 18th anniversary of Joseph's House (our home & hospice for homeless men and women), trying to assess the economic, social and political future of our society, the likelihood of significant disruption, and what role compassion and justice might have in preparing for this difficult time and living through it.David Hilfiker

A generation ago (1976) theologian Francis Schaeffer asked the question: “How Should We Then Live?” In the face of everything we know about our world, rooted in our spiritual connection with God (however we name God), given our own strengths and weaknesses, how then should we live? It’s a hopelessly vague question, perhaps a hopelessly romantic question, but it keeps throwing itself upon me, so I try to work with it.

Some twenty years ago, before Joseph’s House was even an idea, I worked at Community of Hope Health Services, a small clinic over on 14th and Belmont Sts, in what was then a very poor neighborhood. As I was beginning to see the depth of the oppression and exploitation that had caused my patients’ poverty, I was also beginning to understand the Hebrew prophets’ contention that any nation should be judged on how it treats its poor.

The relationship with God is known in the relationship to the widow, to the orphan, to the foreigner, in other words to the poor and the marginalized. In the language and belief system of the prophets, the nation that didn’t care for its poor would find itself under the judgment of God. So what, I thought to myself in the late 1980s, what would that judgment look like for the United States?

The answer to that question was pretty foggy back then, but it’s come sharply into focus in 2008. We face a series of crises that are building up to what David Korten calls a “perfect economic storm.” Any one of these crises could cause much suffering, but taken together they constitute a deep reckoning for the United States and the rest of the world. None of this is news, I’m sure, to anyone here, but just for the sake of review …

1. The UN estimates that 160,000 people a year are already dying from global warming, most of them poor. And it’s just beginning. The United States has essentially two choices.

Continue to emit unsustainable levels of carbon into the atmosphere, probably destroying civilization as we've known it … or cut our carbon emissions by 80 – 90% within a few years, a goal that will radically shrink our economy and alter our lifestyles.

2. We Americans have been financing our consumerism with absolutely unsustainable debt, importing, for instance, far more than we export, meaning that we have to borrow about $2 billion *a day* to sustain our standard of living. That's part of what's led to a fall in the value of the dollar so that it's worth not much more than half of what it was six years ago. So far, for reasons I won't go into here, other countries have been willing to continue loaning us these vast sums, but the bill will eventually come due, and it won't be pretty.

3. We're reaching a period of so-called "peak oil production." What this means is that although there's still lots of oil left in the ground, it's getting harder and more expensive to get it out, and the *rate* at which we'll be able to extract it will peak and then decline. Some experts think we've already passed that peak within the last year or two, contributing to the current spike in oil prices; others think it won't happen until perhaps 2015, but most experts agree it's upon us. Regardless, it'll come before other forms of energy are ready to take oil's place. Since India, China, and other underdeveloped countries are requiring ever-increasing amounts of energy to bring their populations into the middle class, there's not going to be enough oil for us all. Since our economy depends upon oil not only for energy but also for plastics, agricultural fertilizer, transportation and many other necessities, peak oil production will mean ever-increasing prices and limitations on the amount of oil available. Most of us don't realize the extent to which the incredible world economic growth of the last 150 years has been dependent upon cheap oil. At $4 a gallon, gas is still incredibly inexpensive. No one knows how the end of cheap oil will affect the economy, but, again, it won't be pretty.

4. There isn't time to do anything but mention increasing poverty and inequality in the US and around the world, the world food crisis or the world AIDS crisis, the growing US unpopularity around the world and its implications for terrorism, the national security state that seems to be rising up around us, our foreign policy militarism and unilateralism and what that will mean for our ability to access the world's natural resources, the extreme global (and national) clean water shortage, the domination of world politics by corporate power, the rekindled nuclear arms race, and so on.

5. The impact of all these issues is exacerbated by two other problems: a highly centralized corporate media and an increasingly dysfunctional political system. Most people find out what's happening in the economic and political world through the media. But the media are owned and controlled by a very few corporate conglomerates and have ever less ability to see the world as

it really is. So we, the American public, have increasing difficulty in understanding the realities we face. And if we can't understand them, it's unlikely we'll be able to respond appropriately.

6. And while this presidential primary season has given us hope, it remains true that the American political system is overwhelmingly influenced by the wealthy and deeply unresponsive to most people's needs. That means that politics—the primary tool we have for organizing ourselves to respond to what's coming—is deeply dysfunctional … not a good sign.

We all know about most of this. In fact, I was speaking to a young medical audience in Cleveland several weeks ago. Although my talk was on a somewhat medical subject, I ended it with a litany similar to the one I just offered you. I expected a number of challenging comments questioning my gloomy predictions (if not my patriotism). Instead, the first question out of the box started with: "You seem awfully optimistic!" So, I think at some level all of us know that we're facing something new and potentially devastating.

What we don't know, of course, is when or how any of this will unfold, but there are probably some safe bets. Almost all the issues I've mentioned converge in one way or another on the economic. We're going to become a significantly poorer country, at least most of us are. For perhaps half the population, we already *are* a significantly poorer country. Working-class and middle-class incomes have declined over the last generation while retirement pensions and employer-provided health coverage are being wiped out. Higher education now demands starting one's career with debts in the many tens of thousands of dollars. Most Americans now believe that their children will not do as well economically as they've done. Increasing numbers of people are now competing for jobs with people around the world, who are willing to work for much less. And our dollar has been losing value dramatically. But as energy prices go through the roof, natural resources become scarcer, foreign countries become increasingly less willing to loan us the money to support our consumption habit, and so on, economic turmoil comparable to that of the Great Depression seems increasingly likely. A capitalist economy depends upon economic growth; what happens when we reach the environmental limits of growth?

The impact of economic hard times on the poor, of course, will be even greater than on the rest of us. Given government indebtedness and partisan polarization, it's not at all clear that as a country we'll be willing to invest in education, health care, child care, job training, job security, income supports or the other government tools to sustain people through difficult times.

The not-explicitly-economic impacts of the other looming crises are much more difficult to predict.

- The depth of global warming and its impact are still too uncertain to justify anything except educated guesses. But at a minimum, large numbers of refugees, decreased food production, and death from extreme weather seem unavoidable.
- What decisions will our government make if other countries start pushing back against us while we still have such inordinate military power?
- Will the response of the politically and economically powerful to all these changes be to wall themselves off in their enclaves while scuttling responses that might make a reasonable survival possible?
- Will there be an even more substantial loss of civil liberties?
- Will there be greater conflict between ethnic and religious groups?

We simply don't know for sure.

But we'd be foolish, it seems to me, not to consider the possibility that things will begin to fall apart and relatively quickly, say within the next ten to fifteen years … which is to say that things have already begun to fall apart. So, what then? How *then* should we live?

I think it's helpful to recognize that the underlying causes of the coming crises are essentially moral, or spiritual, in nature. It seems simplistic and naïve to say it, of course, but if each one of us were willing to act with compassion and justice, none of this would be very difficult. There are still enough resources in the world to feed, clothe, house, educate, and provide health care for every single person in the world and to do it in an environmentally sustainable way. It's possible to reduce our carbon footprint, to do away with our debt, to end our reliance on oil, to ameliorate the poverty that fuels terrorism, and to reduce our military to defensive purposes only. There's enough for everyone ***if*** no one takes too much.

As someone younger than myself might respond: "Well, duh! If you could get everyone to do the right thing, well, of course, we wouldn't have these problems. You're talking about the Kingdom of God coming on earth, and we don't seem any closer to that than we were two thousand years ago. Aren't you being a tad unrealistic to pin your hopes on that?"

Of course. But I point out the obvious to remind us that we're not talking about a

mathematical or physical impossibility. We're not even talking about asking people to give up satisfying and meaningful lives. We're talking about how to change things so that more of us—a critical mass—can see and understand the kinds of behavior necessary to save us all. Simple-minded perhaps, but that's the *real* task.

And that brings us—finally—to compassion and justice: two forms of profound love.

We've learned a lot at Joseph's House in the past eighteen years. Through our doors have come the rich, the poor, and those in between. They've come as staff, volunteers, residents, guests, and even one active presidential candidate. And we can attest to the deep wells of compassion within each one of us. Often people can't access those wells because we're too scared, or too busy, or too angry … but mostly it's because we're too scared.

- Scared there won't be enough for ourselves if we give it away.
- Scared we don't know how to offer it and so we'll make things worse.
- Scared our compassion will be rejected, and we'll feel foolish or inept.
- Scared it'll be accepted and we'll be consumed by the need.

But at Joseph's House

- We learn not to be afraid.
- We learn the joy of giving ourselves away.
- We learn we can recover from the pain of rejection and that there will be enough.

There are many miracles at the House, but perhaps the greatest is the compassion uncovered and given away by those people who enter our doors. We don't "*teach* compassion," but we do give people permission to find it within themselves and support them to give it away.

There's also a deep desire for justice within each of us. It comes, fundamentally, from the same place as compassion. As compassion is a *personal* form of love, so justice is the *social* form of love. And, as human beings, we want to be a part of it; that's built into us. Again, that deep desire can be hidden by hurt or fear or want or greed, but it's there. One problem is that the desire for justice can be much more difficult to express than compassion. For us who are affluent or middle class, it involves first understanding that we've taken (or been given)

resources that belong to others, understanding that our privilege is at the expense of others. And so we have to give back what we've taken. It's a difficult first step. As our sight for justice becomes keener, we see we have to begin organizing ourselves and others, not always easy in our individualistic culture. And then we notice that our desire for justice involves confrontation: confronting structures of injustice, confronting people within those structures. Often it requires the humility to be open to the possibility we're wrong. It can be slow, plodding work that seems like it's going nowhere.

In a world that's falling apart, the small personal acts of expressing compassion and the small, community acts of working for justice have an even deeper meaning. When the world is falling apart, people begin to look for models of how they should live, of what kind of institutions they should build, of what kind of social structures they should work for. At that point we who are living lives of compassion, who are moving toward lives of justice, who are creating and working in institutions of justice, who have thought through what social structures should look like … at that point we become models for others to use. During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt didn't create the institutions of the New Deal out of his head; he went to smaller demonstration projects and found models there that he then implemented on a grander scale. When the Soviet Union was in decline, activists in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia couldn't compete with the Soviet military. But they began building alternative structures—like the union Solidarity—that became models for the larger society once the Soviet bear collapsed. Our alternative lives, our alternative institutions become templates that can change the larger society.

All this is much too simply stated, perhaps naïve. We Americans tend not to trust that change can happen unless we can see the straight line that will lead from our action to the greater change. But that's not usually how it happens. Usually you see the lines from action to greater change only in retrospect. Besides, finding hope in a world falling apart isn't, in its essence, about optimism that we're going to make things better. We find hope in living lives of compassion, in working for justice. We find hope knowing that we're doing that to which we're most deeply called. It's a simple thing, really. And it's very close to that Kingdom of God.

Thank you all for coming to celebrate with us.