

## **A New Bottom Line by Rabbi Michael Lerner**

Joseph Schwartzberg's brilliant book *Transforming the United Nations System* is a powerful and compelling design for a workable world. While growing up in the 1950s and 1960s I read many articles and books that supplied me with other pictures of a workable world, none as comprehensive as this one, and yet in their way they had many important and useful ideas which would have dramatically improved our world. I often wondered why these great ideas were not being implemented.

After completing a ph.d. in philosophy and teaching ethics, political and social philosophy and philosophy of mind at various colleges and universities, I began to realize that good ideas were not sufficient to change the world. Students seemed to be stuck in a set of feelings and worldviews through which they processed all the information they were learning in college or university, and so I sought to understand those feelings and larger worldviews by getting a second ph.d. in psychology and studying the obstacles to opening to ideas on how to improve and heal what had become obvious to me was an increasingly broken and irrational societal arrangements, including the way nations were engaged in wars, racism, and the demeaning of others. So I studied history and listened to my own clients, many of them quite healthy yet unhappy, and as I reflected on the thousands of people I had met in the social change movements of the 60s and 70s, many of them people who had enthusiastically embraced social change and then almost as rapidly abandoned the hopes that had led them into these movements, I began to realize that there seemed to be an internal struggle in almost everyone between two alternative worldviews about the nature of human reality.

The first worldview taught that human beings were, in the words of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, thrown into this world by ourselves. As each of us comes into consciousness we discover that we are surrounded by people who are seeking to dominate and control others in order to advance their own self-interest. They will do anything they deem necessary to promote these interests, including manipulating us or using power over us. In such a world, the only rational way to behave, according to this worldview, is to learn the skills of manipulation and power over others because if you do not do so, others will exercise their power and control over you. “Looking out for number one” and “winning through intimidation” become the common sense of societies like this, and people adapt to this kind of world not because they are inherently evil but because it is a survival necessity. And this worldview has a politics: the best way to achieve safety and security for your family, your community, and your country is to maximize their advantage over others through domination, control or manipulation (sometimes through economic domination, cultural domination, clever diplomacy, and/or military power and war. The others are always suspect, likely to take from you what you need unless you have the power to prevent that through these various mechanisms of “power over.” It is a worldview which generates fear of the other and deep distrust and isolation.

The second worldview says something quite different. “No, you didn’t come into this world by yourself, you came into this world through a mother, and your mother gave you the loving and caring necessary to survive in the first few years of your life without which you would have failed to thrive and probably would not have survived. That mother might have been your biological mother, it could have been your father or some other person, but without someone providing you with

that caring you wouldn't be alive today. And that person did not have a reasonable expectation of a good return on her/his giving you the amount of caring you received—s/he gave to you for the sake of giving, not for the sake of getting a payoff.” In this worldview, what we first learn about human beings is that they are capable of and desire to give love, kindness and generosity. Throughout much of the past thousands of years, it was this view that formed the foundation for those religions and spiritual paths that survived into the modern era. On this worldview, your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of your family comes through your ability to be generous, caring, and sharing with others. And this too leads to a politics—the way to ensure homeland security is through generosity, not through domination. So this is a worldview of hope, of caring for others, and of generosity.

Most people alive on the planet have heard both worldviews, and most have both voices inside their own psyches, each contending with the other for how best to understand their own world. Which one is predominant at any moment depends on a variety of factors in one's own psychological history, and also on where the larger social energy is moving in the society. When the social energy is moving more toward fear, the voices in our own psyches that have been shaped by the first worldview seem more confirmed; when social energy moves toward hope, the voices of the second worldview tend to feel more confirmed and we feel safer taking them more seriously.

Obviously, when the worldview of hope and generosity becomes more predominant, ideas for reform of the United Nations will have greater social credibility. So if we want the ideas of world federalists and the brilliant ideas of Joseph Schwartzberg to become a reality, we need to focus on a central prerequisite: consciousness transformation in our world to support the worldview of hope. Not an easy task, but a

necessary one. So how do we do that in a capitalist society? To answer that question, I decided to study in greater detail the psychodynamics of North American societies. And so I created the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, focused on understanding the lives of middle income Americans.

I was blessed to be awarded a major research grant by the National Institute of Mental Health to study stress at work and stress in family life, and in the course of that study I and my colleagues gave special focus to the decreasing support for the labor movement and other liberal and progressive forces including the Democratic Party. What was particularly striking to us was that middle income working people were voting against their economic interests to support Ronald Reagan and reactionary Republicans whose programs actually decreased the social services and income of a significant section of their supporters.

The Left had an explanation for all this: it said that working class and middle income Americans who were moving to the Right were doing so because they were racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, or stupid. Yet in the research I was leading we were hearing something very different: that there was and continues to be a deep spiritual crisis in American society and in subsequent research I did I found that this same thing was true of much of the Western world. While progressives were putting forward wonderful ideas about peace, social justice, and environmental sanity, a significant section of working people were decreasingly moved by the focus on political rights and entitlements, and more attracted to those who could speak to the primary deficiency in their lives: the absence of meaning and purpose in their work worlds, and the feelings that they were surrounded by selfishness and materialism that governed every aspect of the institutions in which they worked and the society in which

they lived. They hungered for love and a sense of being treated as valuable not for what they could accomplish in the competitive marketplace, but rather for who they were as human beings regardless of their accomplishments or their money or power. They wanted love and caring at least as much as they wanted a raise in their salaries.

We tried to explain our findings to people in the Labor movement, the Democratic Party, and a wide variety of academics, liberals and progressives, but met resistance and denial. “Look,” the labor leaders told us, “our workers only show up at union meetings when it comes time to negotiate a new contract. Otherwise they could care less about our unions.” But when we put their response to people from unions in some of the groups we were running as part of this research, the response we heard was “yes, in a world where no one takes us seriously and we have to spend our lives working at tasks that have little intrinsic meaning or satisfaction, of course we want more money as a compensation for a wasted life and as a means of getting a pension so that at some point in our lives we will have the means to do something that has more meaning for us personally. Our unions never really care about us, they are more like our insurance companies—we give them some money and they are there for us if we get into trouble, but don’t expect us to love our insurance brokers, and neither do we care much for the union leaders or Democratic Party politicians who at times might be providing us with some benefits, but who don’t understand us or care a bit about us.” Similarly, when we approached leaders of the Democratic Party we were told, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

What had happened was a massive despair about liberal and progressive ideas ever addressing what was hurting in their lives. And that was true for the liberal churches as well—more and more they were speaking the language of rights and entitlements, providing a form of religion that seemed more

focused on being seen as supports to the liberal and progressive forces in society than as places where a sense of higher meaning and purpose could survive. So as many people reported to our researchers, their experience in liberal and progressive churches and synagogues was that they heard great talks about high ideals, but then after the service nobody seemed to really care about them. But when they went to right-wing churches they felt a tangible caring, as people approached them both before and after the services with a genuine interest in who they were, in what they might need in their lives.

As we sifted through our qualitative data, the conversations we were having with middle income working people and union members and former union members we got a powerful picture of an America in spiritual crisis: because what people were hungering for most was for love and recognition, for a sense of being part of something that they could believe in. Yet what they told us was that they were experiencing themselves as part of a society which only valued money and power, and that they were only seen as valuable to the extent that they could maximize the bottom line for their employers. But what was worse, the same values surrounded them in personal lives. And no wonder, because having spent all day in the world of work, and then returning to daily life in which people around them were increasingly treating them as valuable only to the extent that they were useful, could satisfy the needs of their friends, they grew increasingly cynical about the possibility of anything else in the world than the materialism, selfishness and “looking out for number one” that was and continues to be the “common sense” of people living in a global capitalist society. Even in personal life, people were experiencing this same problem—in relationships, people described to us a world in which families and loving relationships were increasingly based on a kind of market calculation when entering into marriages. It went something like this: “Among the people who

are likely to fall for me in the short run, who is likely to fill more of my needs than anyone else?” and then I can commit to that person. Not often consciously, but very pervasively, this kind of thinking underlies even the most significant personal relationships, and leads to a huge insecurity in family life today, because one can never be sure that one’s partner or spouse will not at some point find someone else who can satisfy yet more of their needs, and in that case, as a rational maximizer of self-interest, they will leave their marriage in the hopes of getting more of what they believe they need from someone else. And this utilitarian approach is even learned early by children: “hey, what have you done for me lately, dad or mom?”

Is anything else possible? Yes, there is a different way of looking at others, not in terms of what they can deliver for you but instead seeing them as intrinsically valuable for who they are as embodiments of some higher spiritual value. We call this a spiritual approach to the world and to others, but you don’t have to believe in God or be part of a religion to be spiritual. Martin Buber called this an I-Thou relationship to others and to the planet earth. Immanuel Kant talked about treating others as Subjects and not as Objects. And it is precisely this which people seek when they turn to reactionary movements or fundamentalist religious communities. Because as much as those communities demean others on the outside, or reactionary movements demean people from other religions or races or political affiliations, people often feel that what they are being offered in these communities is some primal validation for themselves as fundamentally valuable not based on their money or power, of which they don’t often have a lot, but rather because they are part of something larger, whether that be as a member of the nation (the U.S., Russia, Germany, China, Israel, Canada, wherever), as part of the White race, as part of the religious community (whether that be Christian,

Jewish, Muslim, whatever) or some other community that momentarily gives them a sense of value and of being loved or cared for just by virtue of being part of that community. And it is that same sense of wanting a world in which they are being cared for regardless of what they can accomplish which gives many of them a particular sense of identification with the unborn fetus, because there is for many of them a classic case of a powerless being who is being hurt by someone else who is caring just about themselves ( a position I do not hold, but which I can see how they got there, even at the expense of seeing that they are not caring about the woman or family that is otherwise being required to carry to term an unwanted pregnancy, and even though once born, these same people seem indifferent to providing the social supports needed to genuinely take care of that child).

A further irony: people who feel deeply in need of a caring society have joined themselves to political forces that are actually undermining the kind of caring that they need. Yet it is not hard to see why: because the New Deal and the Great Society programs of the 1960s delivered objective caring in the form of financial benefits and entitlements, but little in the way of subjective caring. In fact, people interacting with government institutions often found them insensitive and arrogant. Yet when we talked to people in government institutions, we heard from them that the pressure for them to be productive meant that they were being pressured to not spend the time to show genuine caring. As some of them put it, "our supervisors don't reward caring, they reward speed." Only a government problem? Hardly. Ask any health care practitioner or any teacher and you hear similar complaints: we are being judged by how quickly we do our job, and how our patients or students do on various objective measurements, but never about how much they feel cared for.

So what does this have to do with the brilliant ideas of reconstructing the U.N. or building a world government? Everything. Because as long as people feel that the biggest set of needs in their lives are not being met by the society in which they live, they will remain deeply cynical about anything involving extending the power of government much less of an international government. And as long as they feel that everyone is only out for themselves, they are highly unlikely to commit to any institutional arrangements that seem to naively deny the reality of selfishness and materialism, even though simultaneously these same people hate that this is the way the world is, but nevertheless repeat the mantras that they've been taught—that this is human nature and that to hope for anything else is utopian fantasy.

It is for this reason that the powerful ideas we have heard expressed here may find it very difficult to achieve mass support until we address the central ideological supports of global capitalism and put forward a different worldview. Trying to change the UN without a major campaign to challenge the ethos of selfishness and materialism that dominate public discourse today in the U.S. is a losing proposition. Every day the cynicism in our society shapes how people perceive the likelihood of any major change happening. One day they read that Volkswagen has fixed the devices on their cars to give false information about how much pollution they are causing, a few days later they read that Fiat-Chrysler has under-reported the number of deaths and injuries caused by problems with their cars, and then the next day the President of the U.S., after leading a campaign to get the Iranian nuclear deal done supposedly to avoid more Middle East wars then promises to provide massive new armaments to Israel which it could easily use against Iran to provoke the very war that Obama said he wanted to avoid.

Only a fundamental shift in the public discourse of our society and a huge movement committed to that shift would have a chance of creating the preconditions for the kind of public consciousness that would make the plans for a Workable World gain widespread political support.

Most people crave a world filled with love and care. Yet most of us doubt that we can experience a loving and caring world beyond our own private lives and homes.

. We see ourselves surrounded by people who only seem to care about us to the extent that we can “deliver something.” In short, people have absorbed the old bottom line of the capitalist marketplace, and have come to believe that this is just reality.

### **A New Bottom Line**

Spiritual progressives, unlike their liberal counterparts, understand that political rights and economic entitlements while important are not what people are actually most craving. Sure, give them an opportunity to affirm a different kind of world and even a different kind of United Nations and they'll say YES! But simultaneously they will tell themselves and each other that such a world is impossible, and hence it is dangerous and self destructive yearn for such a world. To successfully transform our society from its current obsession with acquiring material goods, we need to help connect people with their deepest yearnings for a world of meaning and purpose. Simultaneously, we need to provide a

framework for concrete political proposals that are grounded in spiritual principles as a counter to the one-dimensionality of many liberal proposals.

Given all this, our central demand must be for a New Bottom Line—one that counters the emphasis on money and power and instead judges the rationality, efficiency, and productivity of our institutions, corporations, legislation, social practices, health care system, schools, legal system, and social policies by how much love, compassion, kindness, generosity, and ethical and ecological sensitivity they inculcate within is. The New Bottom Line places priority on the extent to which institutions and policies nurture our capacity to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred and to respond to the grandeur of the universe with gratitude, awe, and wonder. If we embrace this New Bottom Line as we interact with others, then instead of seeing others as a means to our own ends, we will create a world in which we see and value one another's humanity. To the extent that our economic, political and social arrangements are in fact governed by this New Bottom Line, we will begin to rebuild trust in each other's goodness and start to believe that compassion and kindness can flourish not only in our homes but in our communities and our workplaces as well.

Seeking a world which embodies this New Bottom Line is the central message of the Network of Spiritual Progressives. Rejecting the “common sense” of capitalist society that human beings are primarily motivated by their narrow material self-interest (or as a prominent Democratic Party strategist put it, “it’s the economy stupid”) we call for liberals and progressives to affirm the psychological, ethical and spiritual dimensions of humanity which have been stymied and unfulfilled in self-described capitalist and socialist societies, and largely ignored by liberal and conservative public policies in most Western countries.

Spiritual progressives know that progressive economic and political demands will never be fully embraced by the American majority until we address the feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness felt by so many people. To do so, we must become sensitive to the deep (though sometimes unconscious) hunger that people have for a loving world in which our lives have some higher meaning beyond the accumulation of money or power. Spiritual progressives seek to build a world that nurtures these fundamental yearnings. We recognize that doing so requires both internal transformation and a fundamental reshaping of our economic system, political system, and societal practices.

We affirm the deep desire and yearning of human beings to live in a world in which we are deeply appreciated, loved, cared for, respected and treated as embodiments of the sacred. But we recognize that human beings are complex and at times have competing and contradictory desires. We are sadly aware of the cruelty, hurtfulness, selfishness and pain that gets communicated from generation to generation, not only in the inheritance we have from parents who themselves felt under-recognized and without the love that they deserved and needed, but also from the institutions and social practices that often powerfully reproduce that cruelty and hurtfulness. We know that the changes we wish to see in the world require multiple levels of tikkun (the healing and transformation of our world) – psychological, spiritual, intellectual, economic and political. We are not Pollyannaish about how easy it will be to achieve these transformations. But we have no choice but to try. Here's why.

The current economic and political system has created an unprecedented environmental crisis that is wreaking havoc on peoples' lives and has the potential to destroy the life support system of the planet. As the crisis intensifies, the powerful, rather than transforming the system that is destroying the planet may instead rally support for their system by further undermining democratic and human rights and imposing authoritarian or even fascistic forms of rule. In

the face of this reality, the struggle for a New Bottom Line becomes the most rational way to transform societal and global consciousness so we can build an effective movement to transform political, economic and social structures. The visioning done in this conference can become an important part of that process, but only if it leads people involved to explicitly embrace the New Bottom Line.

To begin the campaign for a New Bottom Line, we at Tikkun magazine and the Network of Spiritual Progressives have advanced two major programs: a Global Marshall Plan which not only would have the US take the leadership in getting the major economically powerful countries of the world to dedicate 1-2% of their GDP each year for the next twenty (that's all it would take) to eliminate (not ameliorate) domestic and global poverty, homelessness, inadequate education and inadequate health care, but also change the terms of international trade agreements that favor the advanced industrial societies over the well being of the poor and marginal farmers in third world countries, and it would seek to ensure that this kind of program was run by the communities most in need and in ways that encouraged mutual cooperation and caring for others instead of the narrow bureaucratic and supposedly values-free ways that past aid programs have developed.

The second concrete program for advancing the New Bottom Line would be The ESRA—Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The ESRA would require public funding of all state and national elections and ban all other sources of money in elections, not just from corporations but also from any human beings; it would require all the big corporations (incomes over \$50 million a year) which are based in the US or based elsewhere but sell their goods or services here (including on the Internet), to get a new corporate charter once every five years which they could only get by proving a satisfactory history of social and environmental behavior to a jury of ordinary citizens who would receive information from people around the world who have been impacted by the operations of that corporation; and it would mandate environmental and social responsibility education at every grade level from kindergarten through graduate and professional schools, and it would declare null and void any international treaty or agreement entered into by the U.S. or an state as well as part of the US Constitution deemed by the Supreme Court to be inconsistent with the ESRA, and it would empower local communities to impose fines up to confiscatory levels for any corporation whose activities or attempts to move its assets causes economic or other damage to that community.

These two proposals may never pass, but the struggle for them will provide a platform for arguing for the New Bottom Line, just as the ERA never passed in the 1980s but had a huge impact on popularizing a new understanding of feminism and women's rights.

And these programs are the minimum needed to make a dent in the way that corporate America is destroying the life support system of the planet Earth. So they will seem increasingly relevant in the coming decades, and provide a perfect way to talk about what it would look like to have a New Bottom Line in the U.S. In the context of a movement built around these programs and the New Bottom Line, a third concrete program should be the plans to transform the United Nations in ways similar to those proposed by Joseph Schwartzberg.

Let me add a slight emendation to the Schwartzberg vision. While I fully agree that the U.N. needs a second House along the lines of a World Parliamentary Assembly, I do not favor a bicameral UN but a tricameral U.N. The third house of the U.N. with equal power to the other two houses, should be composed of the world's most environmentally and social justice sensitive religious and spiritual leaders, poets and artists, social theorists and scientists. I'll leave to another time my suggestions on how these should be chosen and what mechanisms should be established in the

relevant communities to recall members of this World Spiritual Assembly. But it may very well turn out that it is precisely this kind of a body that will have more legitimacy in the eyes of many billions of people on this planet than the other two more politically based branches of the United Nations or any other subsequent world government that might emerge.

All unrealistic fantasy? No more so than the fantasy that led women to believe that they could overcome 10 thousand years of patriarchy, American progressives to think we could defeat segregation, South Africans to believe that apartheid could be dismantled, and more recently gay and lesbian movements to believe that marriage equality could be achieved in this society. You will never know what is possible till your struggle (sometimes for many decades) for what is desirable. First step, join with me by becoming part of the Network of Spiritual Progressives at [www.spiritualprogressives.org/join](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/join). We are engaged in building the consciousness transformation that is the necessary precondition for people giving the world federalists and Joseph Schwartzberg the serious attention that their important ideas deserve.

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Award for 2014 and again in 2015 from the mainstream media's Religion Newswriters Association. He is the chair of the Network of Spiritual Progressives [www.spiritualprogressives.org](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org), rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue, and author of eleven books including two national best-sellers: *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right* and *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*. He welcomes responses from people interested in working with him on the consciousness transformation he describes in this essay: [RabbiLerner.tikkun@gmail.com](mailto:RabbiLerner.tikkun@gmail.com)