

"Over the (Fiscal) Cliff & Into the Deep"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
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"New Year's Day" by Kathleen McTigue

The first of January is another day dawning, the sun rising as the sun always rises, the earth moving in its rhythms, with or without our calendars to name a certain day as the day of new beginning, separating the old from the new. So it is: everything is the same bound into its history as we ourselves are bound. Yet also we stand at a threshold, the New Year something truly new, still unformed, leaving a stunning power in our hands.

What shall we do with this great gift of Time, this year?

Let us begin by remembering that whatever justice, whatever peace and wholeness might bloom in our world this year, we are the hearts and minds, the hands and feet, the embodiment of all the best visions of our people.

The New Year can be new ground for the seeds of our dreams. Let us take the step forward together, onto new ground, planting our dreams well, faithfully, and in joy.

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A confession: I am math-phobic. I wish I could tell you that it's gotten better in the years since the professor of "Basic Concepts of Elementary Mathematics", a professor known for her encouraging ways, encouraged this student to "just drop the course." I followed her advice, pronto.

Follow these dots: this phobia has also meant that I resist engaging with economics because math-like ideas may be involved therefore comprehension is likely questionable.

Does this sound familiar to any of you?

Regardless, in the last days of 2012 as the apocalypse apparently loomed, I was determined to better understand this fiscal cliff business. "Fiscal cliff" is dramatic enough to drive even the math-phobic to sit down on the couch, tamp down our anxiety, and grapple with this hard reality.

But lo! It turns out that even to the math-phobic, the economics are not terribly difficult to comprehend. And lo! It turns out that to the religious and faith-filled heart, there's another facet not difficult to comprehend: this issue, more than

other critical issues we currently face, desperately needs our deepest moral resolve. And yet, the political landscape is so fraught that in no time at all, one's blood begins to boil for the insanity of it all.

And the theater it presents! The stage was set with all the drama that political maneuvering brings. (Have you seen *Lincoln*?) Was I gaily bringing in the New Year, watching the ball hover above Times Square? No. I was sitting at the edge of my seat watching Vice-President Biden take the seemingly endless walk to the Oval Office to share the news. In the Senate at least, in the 9th hour at last, a deal had been struck. We did not go over the cliff, thankfully. Jobs were saved. Unemployment benefits were preserved. Tax breaks for those who most need them were sustained. Thankfully.

The drama was not over as the bill was then sent to the House of Representatives. But through Acts I & II there was never a sense that the country's *fiscal soul* was at stake. Many wise and faithful faith leaders named this debate as such. One went so far as to pose this question:

"What kind of nation do we want to be? We do need a path to fiscal sustainability, but will it include all of us — especially the most vulnerable? It is the foundational moral choice for the country, and one with dramatic domestic and deadly global implications. It is the most important principle for the faith community in this debate." (Jim Wallis in "Sojourners")

What kind of nation do we want to be? Religious leaders met with members of Congress and indeed, President Obama himself to suggest, remind, cajole, point out that nothing less than our fiscal soul is at stake.

As the Senate opened a rare Sunday session, the Chaplain offered a timely prayer for lawmakers. "Lord, show them the right thing to do and give them the courage to do it. Look with favor on our nation and save us from self-inflicted wounds." (Chaplain Barry Black as reported by the Associated Press – posted on National Public Radio's website 12/30)

"Save us from self-inflicted wounds." Can you imagine? Like Atlas, our leaders shouldered a great deal of responsibility. It's part and parcel of the positions they assume with election, after all.

But how will this deal be judged? That is, how will this deal be judged by *you and me*? By people of faith who presumably hold the greater good above all other considerations. And further, what lies ahead? For, the American people have been assured that *only more* drama lies ahead. *Just* ahead in February, in fact. At that point, those who are seeking cuts to services that support our most

vulnerable will be out in full force. Will we hold steady or will we fall into the deep?

There are several interfaith coalitions that have come together precisely to encourage our leaders to hold steady ... to hold the common good at the center of the decision-making process. These coalitions are not made up of math-phobic clergy, I assure you. They include people of faith who also happen to be economists. They include well-informed clergy. All of whom have joined forces to remind our leaders that a nation is judged by the manner in which the most vulnerable among us are treated: the youngest, the oldest, the most ill, the disabled, and the poor. And these folks are not about offering up prayers and leaving it at that. They're making sound suggestions *with teeth* that are based on sound economic theory.

All suggestions stand on the understanding that getting out from under this mess is going to require sacrifice and hard choices. And "moral arithmetic", says Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian who is the editor of "Sojourner's" magazine. He reasons that,

Our principles won't survive unless we 'find the arithmetic' to protect the poor and include the vulnerable in these crucial decisions about the nation's fiscal soul. And that moral arithmetic must ultimately be presented to the American people in clear moral values choices.

The United Church of Christ, historically our close cousin, similarly suggests that those "clear moral values choices" be presented to the American people. Although economic justice issues are very complicated, "things are a little simpler for people of faith" reasons the UCC Economic Justice leaders. They remind:

... [W]e know that ... radical equality is not reflected in the economic realities of our world. Some of us have very little while others have very much.

Our own Unitarian Universalist Association is one of the sponsors of the Faithful Budget Campaign, an interfaith coalition. The preamble to the Campaign's comprehensive report states:

Our message to our national leaders -- rooted in our sacred texts -- is this: Act with mercy and justice by serving the common good, robustly funding support for poor and vulnerable people, both at home and abroad, and exercising proper care and keeping of the earth.

Clear. Simple. Right?

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Now, I have no doubt that every single person in this sanctuary is all for a national budget that is both morally and fiscally responsible. You get the thing about our fiscal soul and the moral arithmetic it requires. You get the thing about radical equality. It feels clear and simple, right? It feels like the path toward that vision is a straight line: increased revenue from the top earners; closing tax loopholes; thoughtful spending cuts. Leave the deficit be until we are on solid economic ground. Raise the debt ceiling. And so on.

But Friends, be assured that however clear the moral path may be it will be a rugged path to travel here in SE Connecticut where conversation about particular spending cuts feels less righteous than it does threatening.

In the theater, backstage talk of the play *MacBeth* is considered a curse. So much so that even mere mention of “the Scottish play” is strictly off limits. Similarly, there are areas of fiscal debate that the mere mention of which is considered a curse in Southeastern CT.

Indeed, the economic policy recommendations put forth by coalitions of people of faith would not be those raised in the halls of the Southeastern CT Chamber of Commerce. But they can – and must – be raised in Unity Hall here at All Souls, however difficult they may be to hear ... or to preach.

Sure, as mentioned, there are many recommendations that we can all get behind. Righteous recommendations. Not-much-skin-off-our-backs recommendations. You don't need to hear about those recommendations from this pulpit. But consistently, there are others with which we must struggle as people of faith who claim as home a region that has at its economic base defense and pharmaceutical industries.

Let's call upon our deepest courage and go forth together.

The United Church of Christ has a staff economist (!) who suggests the following:

- Curtail military spending. Veterans must receive the services they need. But major cuts should be made to weapons systems that are unnecessary or do not function as intended.

From the Faithful Budget Campaign:

- Make no new investments in nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction.
- Substantially reduce the number of nuclear armed submarines and aircraft.

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Again, from Jim Wallis who poses the question:

- Will we finally have an honest discussion about military spending and national security? Meeting the real needs of our veterans and defending our country means we cannot afford to fund outdated and useless weapons systems. There are many items in the Pentagon's budgets that reflect the pet projects of lawmakers and not the security needs of the nation. Our leaders must have the courage to end the business of war. The faith community must urge them to beat those swords into plowshares.

When our Representatives and Senators fight mightily on behalf of the sub base and indirectly, Electric Boat, is it our country's security that's at the heart of their fierce advocacy? Or is it our region's economic survival? What is keeping us from beating swords into plowshares, Friends? Are we as a congregation less likely to urge our leaders to advocate for plowshares if our regional economy depends on the manufacturing of swords?

As if these recommendations and questions don't threaten our region's economic base quite enough, here's one more for us. Wallis asks:

- Are we willing to stop powerful pharmaceutical companies from preventing more than \$100 billion in drug cost savings to protect their own profits?

For the love of God.

Where do we go from here? What are we called to do? Who are we called to be as a congregation located in the center of these questions? After all, this is our home: these waters, these marsh lands, these woods, *these people*. How can we imagine the greater good ... do our part to hold steady and encourage our leaders to do the same ... while potentially sacrificing the life and the place that we love as we know it?

And what of our people? You, the scientists and engineers who work within these industries. You who are faithful and loving and who claim this place – this faith community, this faith tradition – as home.

Scientists who labor in the pursuit of a cure ... of a way to sustain life and health? Who have little to say or do about the mother ship's choices and morality?

Engineers and those in the yard and those at sea whose skills may just as effectively sustain our Earth ... create peace ... beat swords into plowshares. How might these questions be received as opportunity?

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How might the region entire receive these questions as opportunity rather than threat?

And who is best positioned for the work that ensures that our local economy is sustainable and possessed of the fiscal soul of our yearning? The Chamber of Commerce. The economic leaders who gather each week at local Rotary Clubs. The significant brain trusts at the numerous academies of higher education in the region. Local governments.

Who is consistently in the rooms where these leaders gather? We are. Chamber members. Pfizer employees. EB employees. Sailors. Officers. Students. Professors. Social workers. Non-profit administrators. Peace activists. Economic justice activists. Clergy. Might we conjure a bit of courage to say, "MacBeth" out loud and realize that it is not the curse we thought it would be? Might we be emboldened to ask the questions, make the suggestions that just may create an economic landscape that can sustain us, care for the most vulnerable, and therefore reflect the best of who we aspire to be?

A New Year's prayer:

Let us begin by remembering that whatever justice, whatever peace and wholeness might bloom in our world this year, we are the hearts and minds, the hands and feet, the embodiment of all the best visions of our people. (Excerpt. Kathleen McTigue)

I say this with absolute objectivity: this congregation is the embodiment of all the best visions of our people.

And I ask you: who will we be? Who will we be as people of faith? Who will we be as a congregation? Who will we be as a region? Who will we be as a nation?

If I say it once a week, I say it a hundred times: we'll figure it out. I have that much faith in us as a congregation. I have that much faith in our neighbors.

I have that much faith. I hope that you do too.

Blessed and emboldened may you be.

Amen.