

How Much for Me? How Much for Thee and We?

Dane Smith, Sept. 5, 2010, Unity Church, St. Paul, Minnesota

An intriguing new biography hit the local bookshelves this summer, and I recommend it. It's entitled *Prairie Lightning*, and it's about the life and times of one William Drew Washburn, capitalist extraordinaire, builder of Minnesota's grain mills and its early lumber industry and railroads, also a congressman and U.S. senator from Minnesota, undeniably, one of THE more important people in the history of our state, especially through a white male Euro-American lens, but a significant person regardless of how one views him. For good and bad, William Drew Washburn altered our environment. Or more precisely, the people and the laborers that he organized and employed and sometimes exploited, altered our environment under his direct orders.

Washburn's DNA is everywhere. His family name is the W in WCCO, and the radio and TV institution began as a spin off of the flour-milling empire started by the Washburn and Crosby families, thus WC Company. He also built the railroads on a northern route to the East Coast east through Sault St. Marie, which came to known as the famous Soo Line. Mr. Washburn built the biggest, grandest, most obscenely extravagant mansion in all of Minneapolis, called Fair Oaks, which occupied much of that park block just north of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. A high school in Minneapolis and counties and cities and place names, all kinds of stuff, is named for his family and his equally influential brothers. Photos reveal a thin-lipped, bewhiskered, stern, rather arrogant-looking visage, but by all accounts he was optimistic and lively, furiously energetic and creative, not a passive investor. He took risks, borrowed money, and designed and financed the first great mills on the Falls of St. Anthony, thanks also to millions in government and taxpayer spending on dams and reservoirs, something that almost always gets left out of those stories about so-called individualist supermen. Give the devil his due, Washburn's work laid the foundation of our economy in Minnesota and our identity as the place and the productive people who make an awful lot of food and other mostly good stuff for the world, and General Mills is a direct descendant. He helped establish our place on the planet as the dominant urban center and crossroads of the Upper Midwest and gateway to the Northwestern quadrant of the United States.

And get this. He founded the First Universalist Society in Minneapolis, and for his time, he was a distinctly progressive early force in our state, which, throughout its history has carried a progressive brand, as a place where fairness and public spirit counts for more than in other states. William and other universalists also founded not only the elitist Minneapolis Club, but the Minneapolis Foundation, Lakewood Cemetery, the Washburn Orphanage, now the Washburn Center for Children, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and the Minnesota

Symphony Orchestra. Washburn was an early apostle of abolition and emancipation and feminism and religious freedom and free-thinking liberalism, he was, hurray, and alas, one of us. As an aside, I just had to laugh at a member of our congregation who recently disclosed to me that one of her family members, after attending a service, worried whether we UUs might be kind of a cult, or cult-like. Well, I suppose that case could be made, we are small in numbers and kind of different, there is a certain fanaticism to our anti-fanaticism, but if so, ours was a very American cult, embraced by an amazingly disproportionate number of our founding fathers, presidents of the United States, and capitalist robber barons, also known as, captains of industry. Ours was and is not just a mainstream religion, but an elite faith system, embraced by richer, more powerful, more educated, and more influential individuals than average, by far. Which could lead into the treacherous Calvinist Christian triumphalist reasoning that our wealth is a sign of God's favor, and the great redeeming irony is that UUs then and now reject and are repelled by such a notion.

In hindsight, we wouldn't even think of William Drew Washburn as a progressive today and there's a great morality play to be drawn from his life, which ended not so well, in semi-disgrace and bankruptcy, due to some classic reckless private-sector mismanagement and speculation. Like almost all of our Unitarian Universalist forebears, he led the fight against slavery. But after the Civil War, when push came to shove, as a U.S. senator, he cast a deciding vote that effectively allowed the South to impose Jim Crow laws and create apartheid for African-Americans in the South. William D. Washburn played no small part in severely damaging Minnesota's original inhabitants, the Ojibwe and Dakota people, and destroying almost every stand of original growth white pine in Minnesota and Wisconsin. That's grist for another mill and thankfully lots has been written in recent decades about the underside of these once revered community builders. They did build communities and an abundance that made technological and scientific progress, and they improved many lives, but this often came, unnecessarily, at the expense of other communities.

In his later years, William Washburn identified much less with social reformers, anti-trust laws and various efforts at equalizing outcomes and social justice in Minnesota and the United States. He became much less sympathetic to the emerging liberation theology of his Universalist origins, opposed the Teddy Roosevelt progressives and Universalists and Unitarians who were pushing for the income tax, universal suffrage, and human rights, and tended to side with the defensive and conservative economic aristocracy he had helped establish.

There are a couple of key points in all this on Labor Day weekend when we celebrate the vast majority of Americans and Minnesotans who labor for a living, and who mostly don't own or invest for a living, and with whose perspiration our civilizations have been built. The first

point is a reminder, that some of our direct intellectual and spiritual ancestors valued the “me” every bit as much or more than the “we.” They were intensely self-interested people, empire builders and capitalists, who also tried to balance that side with a conscience and recognition that public stuff, the things we do together for our common good with our democratic governments, were every bit as valuable as the things we do for ourselves for own profit and enrichment. Elites like the Washburns and Pillsburys and the Daytons passionately and personally invested in the public interest, and as the decades wore on Minnesota’s capitalists earned a reputation as among the world’s most generous and enlightened, unafraid of social experimentation and democracy. They were generally supportive of the idea of public-sector growth and intelligent and humane distribution of an often unfair redistribution imposed by capitalism and the marketplace, on the sound theory that more sharing would be good for private-sector growth in the long run. This fairness ethic was shared in Minnesota not just by the Washburns and the Universalist robber barons, but many other of the more egalitarian New Englanders, then waves of cooperatively inclined Scandinavians and Lutherans, and also by many of the broad-minded Catholic immigrants who valued secular education and the idea of common good and social justice almost as much as faith and dogma and literal Biblical infallibility.

The second larger point, is that we are losing ground, big time, once again, and are regressing back to a new kind of Gilded Age, in which the Washburns in our communities have more and more and more, and most of God’s other children have less and less and less. The new elite compared to the Gilded Age might actually comprise a larger percentage of the population, as much as 10 or 20 percent. But the distance between the very top and everyone else, and between the near top and the bottom 80 percent, is undeniably growing. The point is that we have a new aristocracy a building, and national and state inequality regressing to levels not seen since before the New Deal. Not many people know this or remember this, but President George W. Bush himself said this in a speech in February of 2007: “The fact is that income inequality is real. It’s been rising for more than 25 years.” Unquote. This was something of a breakthrough. After many years of denial by the plutocratic establishment, the evidence of yawning inequality is so overwhelmingly abundant that even the most reactionary pundits and firebrands are beginning to acknowledge the obvious.

Quick review of basics. The incomes of the top 10 percent of folks on the income ladder almost doubled since 1980. The incomes of the top one-tenth of one percent have sextupled, increased six-fold over the last three decades. The bottom half actually has lost the most ground. Hourly wages and benefits adjusted for inflation are actually lower, middle-income moms and dads and kids are working harder for less, and the bottom 80 percent on average, are less economically secure than they were in the 1970s.

Of the 20 wealthy democracies in the world, United States is second only to Singapore in inequality between the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent. Our status on this score, approaching conditions of the more oppressive and dysfunctional nations, is embarrassing, at the least. Maybe it's even disgraceful, to have such gross inequality in a nation where it was first declared 234 years ago that all of us are created equal and where we pledge allegiance to one nation indivisible, with justice for ALL.

And what about just lately? During the Great Recession, according to a report on the world's wealth by Merrill Lynch, the world's millionaires and billionaires — now totaling 10 million — saw their overall wealth jump 18.9 percent, to \$39 trillion. The surge in the stock market in 2009 restored many people who had fallen into merely rich and back to really rich. The total wealth of those with more than \$1 million in assets approached the 2007 peak of \$40 trillion. As expected, the most millionaires could be found in the United States, where their ranks rose 16.5 percent, to 2.87 million, last year, according to the report. Their total wealth in North America rose 17.8 percent, to \$10.7 trillion.

And this new Gilded Age, this new inequality, is making us sick.

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation, hardly a bastion of radicalism, has opened a national campaign, featuring exhaustive research and insights from public health officials, highlighting how deep economic, racial and social inequality are dramatically affecting average public health and damaging us on almost every measure of socio-economic well-being.

An important new book by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, "The Spirit Level," makes the case that greater equality makes *everybody* healthier and stronger. Their book reviews decades of research on inequality, down to the level of differences between rich and poor neighborhoods, between equal countries and unequal countries, and between more equal states and less equal states in the United States. Here's the stunning stuff. If you are rich in an unequal society, you will not live as long or be as healthy as you would be if you are on the top end of a more equal society. Of course, you might not be quite as rich in the equal society, so it's a variation on the classic threat of the stick-up man: Your money or your life!

Important caveats:

Few serious progressives these days have any sympathy for forced egalitarianism, or the brutal, undemocratic, totalitarian, fundamentalist Marxist, or fundamentalist theocratic efforts to achieve perfect economic equality. The models with the best outcomes on prosperity and equality and basic socio-economic health inevitably are free-market, free-speech, rule-of-law democracies in Europe and Asia or parts of the old British commonwealth.

Another important side point. This is complicated. The causes of this inequality are not easily chalked up entirely to greed, union-busting, utter disregard for the poor, or the domination of tax and economic policy by free-market supremacists and anti-government ideologues. Two other big factors are huge. One is economic globalization, aspects of which Unitarian Universalists should embrace, since we do view the world as one family of women and men and children, and U.S. workers competing against underpaid international workers certainly has had a role in this national DISEQUALIZATION. Two, the technological revolution and the information age plays a part, creating a widening chasm between those who tend to have advanced degrees and educations and those without such learning, and creating a compelling need to increase higher education attainment rates, especially for immigrants and our Latino and African-American brothers and sisters.

Another caveat in this distressing inequity picture is that there is reason for both hope and gratitude for all our progressive exertions to this date. Thanks to enormous progress last century toward individual, social, economic and racial justice _ and the creation of a reasonably strong social safety net from FDR's New Deal and Social Security, through George Herbert Walker Bush's American Disability Act _ the latest market collapse has not created an apocalyptic full-scale Great Depression. We will get better, we will get fairer and pessimism is not an option.

Important final quandary is this. What the heck do we do, tomorrow and the next day, about this inequality? Many of us I know are already deeply involved in myriad ways toward reducing the inequality crisis. But if you haven't yet, check out MUUSJA (pronunciation "moose-jaw") and I'm not talking about the city in Saskatchewan, but the Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance, you can get involved and get plugged in at muusja.org. Remember also Paul Wellstone's admonition that "politics is about improving people's lives."

For all the value we place on unity and community, we can be as crustily individualistic as William Drew Washburn, and I would never, ever, ever, never presume to dictate to a Unitarian Universalist how they should vote or, God knows, what they should think.

But once again, we are two months away from a democratic decision-making day in which the essential question, as always, is how much for me and how much for thee and we. As we face our choice, we MUST elevate this "we-me" problem above most others and grapple with the fact that it is a political problem. The "me" at the very top and the near top has not had a bigger share of the pie since the 1920s, shortly after William Drew Washburn died, and it's not working out so well for the rest of us. Politics in the final analysis is about who gets how much, and the decisions we make as voters in two months will determine how it goes from there in Minnesota. In 30 years, I can't think of a more important crossroads for

determining whether we keep that fairness brand in this state. There are those who say we can easily drain off another 20 to 30 percent of the resources in our common funds, and dramatically reduce the amounts we set aside for public health for the aged and the poor, for hospitals and schools and colleges, for public infrastructure from parks to highways, for environmental protection, and for public safety. There are others who say that more must be invested in smarter ways to reduce inequality and improve human and physical capital.

You'll have to figure it out for yourselves, and hopefully, you will also figure it out for *ourselves*.

Key phrases from the combatants in this eternal policy struggle are instructive. The title of a recent book by Grover Norquist, perhaps one the most influential conservatives in America, in behalf of what he and others call freedom and for anti-government, anti-tax policies, is quite "me-ish". That book title: "Leave us Alone: Getting the Government's Hands off Our Money, Our Guns and our Lives."

Others we respect offer a very different vision. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that we're all part of "an inescapable network of mutuality." Jesus and Hubert H. Humphrey said that we shall be judged by God and man by the condition of those who are the "least among us," in the words of Jesus, or those in the "dawn, twilight and shadows of life," in Humphrey's words. Paul Wellstone said that "We all do better when we ALL do better." One elitist descendant of Gilded Age capitalists, and whose face is on Mt. Rushmore, and who undoubtedly knew William Drew Washburn, said almost exactly the same thing as Wellstone. This man, former President Theodore Roosevelt, said: "The Welfare of Each of Us is Dependent Fundamentally Upon the Welfare of All of Us"

And finally, reconciling me and we with some good old-fashioned unshakeable Unitarian Universalist optimism about progress and humanism, let's close with this statement from our very own uber-entrepreneur William Drew Washburn, who said this, when he was being we-ish and not so me-ish.

"We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and to practice good works, for these things are good and profitable unto men," Washburn said, adding, "Universalism is the belief...that the best possible outcome is to be expected to the human experiment."

The Criminal (adapted) By Khalil Gibran

A young man of strong body, weakened by hunger, sat on the street stretching his hand toward all who passed, begging and repeating the sad song of his defeat in life.

When night came, his lips and tongue were parched, while his hand was still as empty as his stomach.

He gathered himself and went out from the city, where he sat under a tree and wept bitterly. Then he lifted his puzzled eyes to heaven and said, "Oh Lord, I went to the rich man and asked for employment, but he turned me away because of my shabbiness; I knocked at the school door, but was forbidden solace because I was empty-handed; I sought any occupation that would give me bread, but all to no avail. In desperation I asked alms, but Thy worshippers saw me and said "He is strong and lazy, and he should not beg."

His expression then changed. He arose and his eyes now glittered in determination. He fashioned a thick and heavy stick from the branch of the tree, and pointed it toward the city, shouting, "I asked for bread with all the strength of my voice, and was refused. Now I shall obtain it by the strength of my muscles! I asked for bread in the name of mercy and love, but humanity did not heed. I shall take it now in the name of evil!"

The passing years rendered the youth a robber, killer and destroyer of souls; he crushed all who opposed him; he amassed fabulous wealth with which he won himself over to those in power.

His riches and false position prevailed upon the Emir to appoint him deputy in that city. Thefts were then legalized; oppression was supported by authority; crushing of the weak became commonplace.

Thus does the first touch of humanity's selfishness make criminals of the humble, and make killers of the sons of peace; thus does the early greed of humanity grow and strike back at humanity a thousand fold!