

ELEMENTS OF UTOPIA

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Kim: Suzanne and I will be reading to you from several poems, short essays, and short stories about our view of what the nature of utopia in our own society is right now. Utopian-like visions that express an understanding of health within our society in the present is our main objective. We'll do this through the following two questions: Can "Utopia" exist within our present society? and If, we were to break down our present society, then what elements of "Utopia" would already be found to exist here in the now.

Suzanne: The first reading is a section of a story from *Winnie The Pooh*. Winnie the Pooh, Piglet, and Rabbit are lost and are trying to find their way home.

After a while, they came to a sand pit.

"Something is wrong," said Piglet. "I'm sure we've passed by here before."

"Nonsense," said Rabbit. "Keep walking."

Soon they came to the sand pit again.

"I believe we are lost," said Pooh. "We've been looking for home, but we keep finding the sand pit. Maybe, if we start looking for the sand pit, we will find our way home."

Kim: Throughout history humanity has been searching for a better way, for a utopian society if you will. Cross-culturally humans have repeatedly attempted to live out their utopian visions and have just as often failed. Our attempts at manifesting "Utopia" are a clear indication that a need exists within the human spirit to find something better. However, our repeated failures signify a much greater problem with the concept of "Utopia". Is it possible we are not sure of what "Utopia" consists of? In searching for "Utopia" we find ourselves forever at the "sand pit". Unable to find our way to our way to the desired destination.

But, what if we were to change what we were looking for? By focusing on the elements of "Utopia" instead of on the entire concept itself, we may gain a more complete understanding of what it is we desire and of how we can achieve it. Perhaps, Winnie the Pooh was right if we start looking for the sand pit, chances are we'll find "Utopia". The great French writer Marcel Proust wrote, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

Suzanne: One element we considered was the economic state of "Utopia". I will read from, Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart, a short piece of contemporary wisdom.

The rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the southern fisherman laying lazily beside his boat, smoking a pipe.

"Why aren't you out fishing?" said the industrialist.

"Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch some more?"

"What would I do with it?"

"You would earn more money," was the reply. "With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat to go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you could make enough money to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats, maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me."

"What would I do then?"

"Then you could really enjoy life."

"What do you think I am doing right now?"

Kim: Another piece which represents and explains the economics of "Utopia" comes to us from the philosopher Kahlil Gibran from his book, The Prophet. In The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran states that it is everyone's responsibility to make sure that the bounty of the earth be evenly distributed and that we all work to support each other. He writes:

To you the earth yields her fruit, and you shall not want if you but know how to fill your hand. It is in exchanging the gifts of the earth that you shall find abundance and be satisfied. Yet unless the exchange be in love and kindly justice it will but lead some to greed and others to hunger. When in the marketplace you toilers of the sea and the fields and the vineyards meet the weavers and the potters and the gatherers of spices and those men invoke then the master spirit of the earth to come into your midst and sanctify the scales and the reckoning that weighed value against value. And suffer not the barren handed to take part in your transactions, who would sell their words for your labor. To such men you should say, "Come with us to the fields or go with our brothers to the sea and cast your nets for the land and the sea shall be bountiful to you even as to us." And if there come the singers and the dancers and the flute players, buy of their gifts also for they too are gatherers of fruit and frankincense and that which they bring though fashioned of dreams, is food for your soul. Now, before you leave the marketplace see that no one has gone his way with empty hands for the master spirit of the earth shall not sleep peacefully upon the wind till the needs of the least of you are satisfied.

Suzanne: One idea that "Utopia" often holds is that of isolation. The utopias that we've read and heard about in the *Utopian-Visions* lecture series have been

communities that have been isolated so one question that arose is, "Does 'Utopia' need to be a small isolated community or can it be a large open society?"

Isolation is commonly thought of to be a physical separation the rest of the world. I'd like for us to keep in mind the possibilities of isolation. For example, economic isolation - the wealthy in this country and others have better or higher quality access to medical care, food, housing, and genetic testing.

Another element we have also considered are gender issues within "Utopia". Is it possible for us to have "Utopia" between the sexes? In reading several books, I found two small communities that possessed a very utopian quality to them. The first community is a nomadic pastoral society in Niger. This society believes that the sexes are opposite and complementary, belonging to one and the same human category which is totally different from and excludes all other categories. Here it should be briefly mentioned that within this society's language masculine and feminine genders do not exist and that nouns are arranged in a number of classes which indisputably indicates a manner of conceiving the universe which is both qualitative and quantitative. An example of this would be the case where a female term is employed as the producer of milk which is an important feature in this society. The next example is the Agta. Within this hunter-gatherer society both the men and the women perform hunting and gathering tasks. The Agta have little possessions. Some gift-giving between families establishes ties, but most of the gifts are food. Cloth, kettles, and minor items make up the extent of ownership. As is typical of hunter-gatherer societies no formal institutionalized authority base exists. However, a modest specialization of labor according to gender is present. I would like to say that the difference of gender roles does not mean oppression of either sex. Division of labor according to gender is present in many natural forms. In the Agta societies, women who are capable of bearing children have a different role from those who are not. Teenage women and older women hunt more often than women with young children. In the Agta society men have a equality with men because of a similar authority and decision-making roles due to the equal contributions each sex makes to the society's sustenance resources.

Kim: Another question we had in considering the possibility of a "Utopian" society in the here and now is -- What role race relations might play?" - might play for us, for a utopia, and for all the possible utopias around the world. First, I will read an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have A Dream* speech:

I have a dream that one day this nation will live out the true meaning of it's creed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brother hood. I

have a dream that one day even the State of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that one day my four little children will one day live in a nation that they will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of character. I have a dream today. . .

King goes on to say:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last! Thank God almighty we are free at last!"

Martin Luther King Jr. offers us a vision of equality and of freedom from racial oppression, but I can't help but consider whether or not it is truly possible to have a multi-cultural utopia. In considering our ideal society are we not influenced by our American societal values? We have to allow for the diverse societies found across the globe and understand that a utopia in the United States will not be the same utopia for the people of India or the people of Zimbabwe. Theoretically, the entire globe could become one mass utopia, but in our wildest dreams would that ever be what we really want. My fear is that we would lose the valuable differences between the many cultures that exist today. Perhaps, "Utopia" can only exist where it will not need to assimilate precious customs, languages, and other elements of cultural identities.

Suzanne: Next, we'd like to raise a question concerning ownership and common property. Can we have possessions in "Utopia" or do possessions create inequalities between people that prevent "Utopia"? The idea of non-ownership of land or "things" is necessary for a utopia to be successful. I would like to read once again from this book, Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart:

In the last century, a tourist from the states visited a famous Polish Rabbi. He was astonished to see that the Rabbi's home was only a simple room filled with books. The only furniture was a table and a bench. "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" asked the tourist.

"Where is yours?" replied the Rabbi.

"Mine, but I am only a visitor here."

"Well, so am I." said the Rabbi.

The next element is religion. Wendell Berry's poem, *Do Not Be Ashamed*, relates his feelings on how religion has affected a lot of people.

You'll be walking some night in the comfortable dark of your yard and suddenly a great light will shine round about you, and behind you will be a wall you never saw before. It will be clear to you suddenly that you are about to escape, and that you are guilty; you've misread the complex instructions, you are not a member, you lost your card or never had one. And you will know that they have been there all along, their eyes on your letters and books, their hands in your pockets, their ears wired to your bed. Though you've done nothing shameful, they will want you to be ashamed they will want you to kneel and weep and say that you should be like them. And once you say that you are ashamed, reading the page that they hold out to you, then such a light that you have made in your history will leave you. They will no longer need to pursue you. You will pursue them, begging forgiveness. They will not forgive you. There is no power against them. It is only candor that is aloof from them, only an inward clarity, unashamed, that they cannot reach. Be ready. When their light has picked you out and there questions are asked, say to them: "I am not ashamed". A sure horizon will come around you. The heron will begin it's evening flight from the hill top.

Kim: From an opposite perspective on religion in one's life we're going to return to The Prophet Kahlil Gibran. He questions:

"Is not religion all deeds and all reflections and that which is neither deed nor reflection, but a wonder and a surprise ever springing in the soul even while the hand hew the stone or tend the loom. Who can separate his faith from his actions or his belief from his occupation? Who can spread his hours before him saying this for God and this for myself? This for my soul and this other for my body? All your hours are wings that beat your space from south to south. He who wears his mortality but as his best garment were better naked. The wind and the sun will tear no holes in the skin. And he who defines his conduct by his ethics is imprisoned as a song bird in a cage. The free song comes not through bars and wires. And, he to whom worshipping is a window to open but also to shut has not yet visited the house of his soul whose windows are from dawn to dawn. Your daily lives are your temple and your religion. Whenever you are into it, take with you, your all. Take the plow and the forge and the mallet and the lute. The things you have fashioned in necessity and for the light. Forever you cannot rise above your achievements nor fall lower than your failures and take with you all men for an adoration you cannot fly higher than their hopes nor humble yourself lower than their despair. And, if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles rather look about you and you shall see him praying with your children. And look into faith, you shall see him walking on the clouds outstretching his arms in the lightning and descending in the rain. You shall see him smiling in flowers and rising and waving his hands in trees.

It's fairly obvious that the two passages we just read are in opposition. The passage Suzanne read leaves one to conclude that there is no place for religion, at least for

many people, in "Utopia". The passage I have read from Gibran says that religion is everything, is inseparable from who we are and from what we do. I think we have no choice to recognize that there is a line, a difference between religion and spirituality and we have to question which one of those would have a place with us in "Utopia".

Suzanne: The last element is simplicity, which we think is necessary for "Utopia".

Kim: I'll read first from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. The concept of simplicity is reflected in his poem, *Miracles*:

Why, who makes much of miracle? As to me I know of nothing else but miracles, whether I walk the streets of Manhattan, or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky, or wade with naked feet along the beach just at the edge of the water, or stand under trees in the woods, or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night with any one I love, or sit at the dinner table with the rest, or look at strangers opposite to me riding in the car, or watch honey bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon, or animals beating in the fields, or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air, or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet and bright, or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring. These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles, the whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place. To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle, every cubic inch of space is a miracle every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread the same, every foot of the of the interior swarms with the same. To me the sea is a continual miracle, the fishes that swim -- the rocks -- the motion of the waves -- the ships with men in them. What stranger miracles are there?

Suzanne: The last reading is called, *The Stonecutter*.

There was once a stonecutter who was dissatisfied with himself and his position in life. One day, he passed a wealthy merchant's house and through the open gateway saw many fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must be!" thought the stonecutter. He became very envious, and wished he could be like the merchant. Then he would no longer have to live the life of a mere stonecutter.

To his great surprise, he suddenly became the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever dreamed of, envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. But soon a high official passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants, and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low for the procession. "How powerful that official is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a high official!"

Then he became the high official, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by the people all around, who had to bow down before him as he passed. It was a hot summer day, and the official felt very uncomfortable in the sticky chair. He looked up at the sun. It shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. "How powerful the sun is!" he thought. "I wish I could be the sun!"

Then he became the sun, shining fiercely down on everyone, scorching the fields, cursed by the farmers and the laborers. But a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth, so that his light could no longer shine on everything below. "How powerful that storm cloud is!" he thought. "I wish I could be that cloud!"

Then he became the cloud, flooding the fields and villages, shouted at by everyone. But soon he realized he was being pushed away by some great force, and realized that it was the wind. "How powerful it is!" he thought. "I wish I could become the wind!"

Then he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting the trees, hated and feared by all below him. But after a while, he came up against something he could not move, no matter how much forceful he blew against it --- a huge towering stone. "How powerful that stone is!" he thought. "I wish I could be a stone!"

Then he became a stone, more powerful than anything else on earth. But, as he stood there, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into his solid rock and felt himself being changed. "What could be more powerful than I, the stone," he thought. He looked down and saw far below him the figure of a stonecutter.

Kim: In addressing simplicity and "Utopia" through these last two passages, we are attempting to highlight that a shift in the way in which we look at the "world" will lead us to perceive of "Utopia" as not some enormous complex rigorous concept which needs to be found and consumed at once, but rather as composed of the many moments, relationships, artistic endeavors, and tasks of our simple day to day living. It is here in our daily lives that we may find that we already have reached "Utopia" and that discovery, is our purpose in breaking down "Utopia" into some of it's elements. It is possible that we may find "Utopia" yet. I'd like to close with a few words from Henry David Thoreau, who came as close to finding a personal "Utopia" if such a thing exists, as one might ever hope to come. He advises:

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not much by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more comforting thought than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through

which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its detail, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.