

My Personal Report from the Spiritual Progressives Conference in D.C.

By Rabbi Michael Lerner

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In a front page story in the Washington Post, a major story reporting on our conference proclaimed in its first line “The religious left is back.” “Long overshadowed by the Christian right, religious liberals across a wide swath of denominations are engaged today in their most intensive bout of political organizing and alliance-building since the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s, according to scholars, politicians and clergy members.”

I don't want to say that the conference was without some problematic elements, and this report discusses them as well. I think a spiritual movement must always be honest, self-critical, as well as affirming what is good about what it is doing and accomplishing.

It's hard to convey the level of excitement and enthusiasm experienced by the 1,200+ people who attended the 4-day conference launching the Network of Spiritual Progressives on the East Coast. (Our first conference held in July 2005 in Berkeley had attracted 1,380 people. We had had to turn away hundreds more.) One reporter told me that she had interviewed over a hundred random participants. She had found the following:

1. Attendees were mostly Protestant and Unitarian, though there was a healthy selection of Catholics and Jews. She also reported encountering Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, WICA, and a large number of spiritual but not religious people who did not identify with any religion.
2. The attendees came from 34 states
3. Attendees came because they are sick and tired of having the Religious Right use religion or God language to justify militarism and war, cuts in spending for the poor while cutting taxes on the rich, assaults on basic civil liberties and human rights, assaults on homosexuals, and massive governmental corruption. They wanted to have a different kind of voice speaking for religion, God and spiritual people.
4. All of the people she spoke to expressed overwhelming satisfaction at what they had encountered. The reporter noted to me that she had not found a similar level of satisfaction at a conference like ours.

The All Souls Unitarian Church was a beautiful facility, but the 1,200 people exceeded the capacity of the sanctuary, which typically holds about 1,000 people, so at least two hundred and sometimes more sat in an overflow room and watched the events on a wide screen. The church had been deeply involved in preparations and planning for the conference, and their involvement created a sense of warmth and homecoming that helped make people feel that even though we had more people than we expected, everything felt haimish (like being in one's own home, something one can't get at the big hotels). In truth, we would have

had far more people coming if they could have been accommodated, but it turned out that there were no hotel rooms available in Washington D.C. or even in the neighboring suburbs like Alexandria or Arlington hotels. This was the week of several big conferences and many people from out of town who wanted to come found by three weeks before the conference that unless they had friends they could stay with, they were simply out of luck.

The excitement was palpable from the start of the first session. After prayers from a variety of different religious traditions, the conference erupted in enthusiasm as Catholic nun (and Benedictine Sister) Joan Chittister, my national co-chair of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, presented a compelling analysis of culture and spirituality, followed by Peter Gabel (associate editor of Tikkun, chair of the program on Spirituality and Politics at New College of California in San Francisco, and my collaborator in developing many of the ideas that are now central to the NSP) who provided an engaging account of the spiritual psychodynamics of contemporary society. Gabel was one of the many “spiritual but not religious” people who spoke at the conference and presented a perspective that spoke in a language that bridged the gap and showed how humanists could equally find a home in the Network of Spiritual Progressives along with progressive spiritual people. I won’t say much about my own talk on Wednesday afternoon except to say that it will be available (along with many of the other talks) on audio recordings that should be on sale on our website www.spiritualprogressives.org in about a week, and that some of my friends said it was best talk ever (I’m not so sure about that).

In any event, I also had to announce that our NSP co-chair Cornel West was not coming because his mother was facing an operation and he would be with her in California. Later in the conference we prayed for her speedy recovery and a moment of silence for Charlene Spretnak’s dying mother.

A central part of the conference was the presentation of the Spiritual Covenant with America. While the entire Covenant and its interpretation can be found in the last four chapters of my book *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right*, we used a very scaled-down version to present to Congress (you can find that version at our website www.spiritualprogressives.org). Since we needed preparation for presenting the eight planks of the covenant to Congress, we broke up into eight groups, each one focused on a particular plank of the platform in order to work through some of the issues that might come up around that plank. And then after that we broke into workshops on a variety of issues in spiritual politics.

To tell you about each of the plenary sessions and workshops would be too much for one communication, so we’ll try to print parts of some of these in our September or November issues of the magazine. Suffice it to say that there were mostly wonderful speakers and presenters, a few who were only moderately wonderful, a very few who didn’t quite rise to the level of being wonderful, and a few who didn’t show up at the last moment because of personal illness or illness in their families. But overall the level was very high, serious and sophisticated ideas presented by engaging speakers in a language that was easily accessible, not

academic, and always highly connected to the spiritual and religious and political issues facing our country in 2006. And what was particularly amazing was their willingness to contract their egos and speak in 15-20 minute spots when they were often nationally known figures who are used to having 60-90 minutes and being the center of attention. These were mostly celebrated figures in their own arenas (take, for example, Taylor Branch whose monumental three volume study of Martin Luther King had been universally acclaimed, or Rev. Bill Sinkford, the national president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or America's most famous Islamic theologian Sayyed Hossein Nasr, or Rev. Bob Edgar the chair of the National Council of Churches of Christ, or Episcopal Archdeacon Michael Kendall or Rabbi Arthur Waskow or_well the list goes on and includes over 120 speakers and presenters, all of whom came to this conference by paying for their own transportation and accommodations and then agreed to speak for only a short period of time, a true modeling of ego-contraction that made the spiritual progressive conference possible).

Thursday morning we had hundreds of individual or small group meetings on Capitol Hill with Senators and Members of Congress or sometimes their aides. If you can imagine the reality of having hundreds (approximately 400) such meetings, it was quite amazing. Suddenly Capitol Hill was aflame with discussion of a Spiritual Covenant with America. In sessions on Friday people gave feedback and shared amazing stories of how they were able to articulate ideas they originally doubted their capacity to present, and how amazing it was for them to find receptivity (except among these who were greeted by pure cynicism). Overall most people had very good experiences as they tried to explain at least one particular program plank. That morning I had a private "off-the-record" meeting with U.S. Senator Barack Obama. The one thing I can say about the meeting is that Senator Obama was very much in sync with the approach of the Network of Spiritual Progressives and I was very encouraged by my conversation with him.

We then proceeded to Lafayette Park across from the White House for our Pray-In for Peace. Prayers led by Methodist Bishops, Episcopal and Catholic priests, Muslims, focused both on urging a new receptivity to the Spiritual Covenant with America. I also led prayers for the healing of the brokenness and fear-driven consciousness of the people in the White House including President Bush. I emphasized that while we were not interested in decreasing the intensity of our critique of the hateful and murderous policies of these people, we nevertheless continue to see them as God's children, created in the image of God and embodiments of the sacred, deserving to be seen in their complex humanity just as we ourselves need to be seen that way and not as demons. So we prayed that there would come to them a speedy healing, recognizing that as long as they held power that we very much need for them to recover from the demons that currently twist their consciousness into supporting hate-driven homophobia and murderous policies toward the people of Iraq.

The tone of much of this prayer-gathering was quiet, respectful, and God-oriented. But the tone changed decisively when we brought up Cindy Sheehan to speak. Suddenly the scene was dominated by the electronic media as television cameras and paparazzi jockeyed for position to get the best angles on her and the

thousand of us who had made it to stand opposite the White House. From a tone of contemplation and reflection the energy shifted more to cynicism and anger, and I personally was disappointed. I had hoped that we could model a different energy for a peace rally, and had managed to do that through much of the event. But the presence of the cameras seemed to elicit from the remaining speakers a different and more confrontational vibe and talk of the Spiritual Covenant and our positive vision of an alternative to war receded as more militancy appeared in the language of the next speakers. (I should add that that evening when Cindy Sheehan spoke to our conference back at the All Souls Church we heard a much more reflective, spiritually-centered Cindy whose depth seemed in stark contrast to the more cynical and provocative voice she had put forward at the demonstration). And yet, given the war and the legitimate anger that it generates in all of us, I had to say I felt proud to be identified with Cindy and with Medea Benjamin and the Code Pink women who, at our invitation, took the stage and led a spirited march across the street to the gates of the White House to deliver 40,000 signatures from people who had signed a petition asking the President: DON'T BOMB IRAN.

I had asked our spiritual progressives at the rally to talk to the media people about the intention of our rally to focus on the Spiritual Covenant with America and in particular to point seven in our Covenant about defense policy and homeland security in which we call for a Global Marshall Plan, but it was useless. The notion of us presenting a positive alternative rather than just being "anti" was lost on the reporters present. The media all clustered around Cindy as the celebrity and one of them told one of our NSPers directly: "I don't care what you people are talking about, our job is just to cover what Cindy Sheehan says." And thus the media coverage of that afternoon was largely about Sheehan, though NBC news clips did also mention that Sheehan was speaking at a pray-in for peace led by religious leaders. It's a problem that will emerge for us again in the future: do you invite "celebrities" to speak at your event, knowing that it is precisely the presence of the celebrities that will give it publicity, but on the other hand that the celebs may take a different tack and that in any event the media will focus on them and not on your message, or do you avoid the celebs, but then you can be relatively certain that you get no media attention whatsoever? The advantage of the attention, however slight, is that it conveys hope to millions of others that we have no other way to reach that there are other people out there who share with them the desire to take God away from the militarist and supporters of homophobia, racism, sexism and class-ism. The disadvantage is that the media often make us look much less interesting, attractive and sophisticated than we actually are.

Nothing better illustrated the dangers of media than the story that appeared the next day in the New York Times by their religion reporter Neela Banerjee. In a startling distortion of our conference, Banerjee reported that the NSP had no specific programmatic ideas and seemed to have no focus when approaching Congress. Whereas we had spent the vast majority of time in the first two days focused on the Spiritual Covenant with America and how best to present it, and had then done so, Banerjee did not even mention the Spiritual Covenant or what

we meant by a commitment to a New Bottom Line. I would have been disappointed but not shocked had she taken our specifics, e.g. the Global Marshall Plan, the Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, our call for Single Payer Universal health care, or any of our other specifics and done the usual media cynicism critique. But her report was not just cynicism but outright distortion—she simply claimed we had no focus when the entire energy of the conference had been on the very specific focus of presenting the Spiritual Covenant. If she had explained that she had read the whole covenant and then chosen to attend the one platform group that was not about policy, the plank no. 2 on taking personal responsibility, pointed out that we had such a plank precisely to counter the claim of the Right that progressives and liberals ONLY focus on what government can do and avoid personal responsibility but spiritual progressives were, as spiritual people, equally interested in personal responsibility and transformation, and if she had further pointed out that in our “talking points” for that platform we encouraged elected officials to take one half day per week for themselves and all their employees to get out of their offices and do hands-on helping work in a day-care center, soup kitchen, homeless shelter or the like, she would at least have been honest about what she had experienced and then perhaps mentioned what the other planks were. But without that, the story felt like an unconscionable distortion.

The Times story stood in marked contrast to the next day’s Washington Post front page story which located our conference in the whole reality of a new spiritual left coming into prominence in the U.S., and our leadership role in helping to create that. Written by Post religion reporter Alan Cooperman and by Alyce Murphy, the story also explained that we were not only critiquing the religious right but also the religio-phobia in some quarters of the Left. And it prominently mentioned the Spiritual Covenant with America, as did the right-wing Washington Times (it was only the NY Times that refused to engage with what was really happening, a policy that was equally reflected in its pathetic coverage of the huge anti-war demonstration that took place in NYC in late April, almost as if the news coverage of the Times was at war with the relatively independent and progressive-friendly Editorial page).

Another exciting development: an anonymous donor came forward and offered to match every donation to Tikkun or the Network of Spiritual Progressives of \$1,000 or more, and to double every donation of \$5,000 or more, and this offer will remain through the last week in August. At the conference some people gathered together and pooled their resources to come up with thousand dollar donations, and they have already been matched. On the other hand, the amount of money we need to seriously launch a spiritual/religious progressive movement far exceeds our current financial resources.

The remaining two days of the conference were focused both on deepening our own spiritual practices and understanding, and also at preparing to take the messages and approaches of spiritual progressives back into our own communities. All through the conference we had small groups of ten meeting to give each other personal support and to provide a place for feedback and integration of the experience in our personal consciousness and lives.

After our last conference a group of people of color had gathered and agreed to take responsibility to make sure that we would be more successful in the future in recruiting peoples of color into our organization. In addition, we sent letters to every African American pastor in the Washington area and gave them the following offer: if money was an obstacle, we would give each church 30 free admissions to the conference so as to ensure a higher percentage of participants of color. We then sent a staff person, our new national organizer Nichola@tikkun.org, to meet with African American pastors and church leaders and for months pursued them and others urging participation. I was disappointed to see the low percentage of peoples of color at the conference. Afterwards, another group of people of color came together and committed themselves to do the outreach with us for the future to bring in the much-desired diversity, which I very much value and which our organization is committed to as a priority issue (and which is already reflected in our leadership and the speakers that we include at our events).

Another concern: at one point one of our speakers said that what we are really about is reviving the New Deal and about half the crowd stood up and cheered. Many of us in the leadership looked at each other in despair. Our whole message had been: include and transcend, or, in other words, yes, we want to affirm the best in the liberal agenda, but NO, it was not enough because it didn't speak to the deep spiritual crisis generated by the ethos of materialism and selfishness that was endemic to the economic and political arrangements fostered by the competitive marketplace and its privileging of the old bottom line of money and power. All our venture was based on trying to address this additional level of human need, and trying to show why the New Deal/Fair Deal/Great Society etc. had failed to retain the allegiance of those who economically benefited from those programs (in part because the programs addressed human beings as if they were only economic maximizers of self-interest and had not sought to address their full humanity as ethical and spiritual beings (a crass summary here but this is fully articulated and explained in *The Left Hand of God*, which is the necessary foundation for serious participation in our movement). Some of us posited that the applause didn't represent an abandonment of this analysis, but only an enthusiastic embracing of the liberal agenda, which is, after all, one part of what we want to affirm. Others thought it reflected the desire to affirm the day-to-day work of social justice and peace activists who rarely can find a job paying them to do spiritual progressive work and who, doing the more liberal agenda work, nevertheless deserve to be praised and recognized for the goodness of the work they do, however incomplete we might think it to be. I do affirm that work, and so in that respect felt it was appropriate for people to cheer if that was their reason. But it set off alarm bells in our heads about how much of what we are saying in this movement has yet been absorbed even by its activists.

We decided, then, to concentrate energy in the next year on A) a training program for Spiritual Progressive Activists (details yet to be developed—we hope to have something in the next few months), and B) regional conferences of Spiritual Progressives. We are aware of the danger also that other groups, calling themselves “spiritual activists,” “sacred activists” or “religious progressives” are

also appearing on the scene, using the positive energies we've developed, but actually not really involved in any coherent struggle with the Religious Right for the heart and minds of America, not organizing an actual activist organization with a program and activities, and not willing to commit to making the Spiritual Covenant central and shaping of their activities. Some of these are idealistic but unfocused, others are simply a new slogan to get customers for marketing spirituality<someone even told me, "now that you've made spiritual progressive a new category, I'm going to market it because I can make a living doing so." Of course, some of these gatherings may be a useful place to recruit members for the Network of Spiritual Progressives, and so some of us may want to go to them for that purpose, but on the other hand, they are likely to cause a certain amount of confusion and even disillusionment as others go to them thinking that they are getting the Network of Spiritual Progressives and instead encounter "spiritual activism LITE."

But another part of our agenda now is to bring the Spiritual Covenant into public discourse. Among the activities we hope to see: 1. Local groups seeking the endorsement for the Spiritual Covenant by local city councils, people running for office, unions, churches and synagogues and mosques, professional organizations, etc., and 2. Creation of a caucus within whatever political party you are part of (e.g. Spiritual Dems, Greens or Republicans). We strongly urge our members to NOT make the caucus too open, but rather only open to people who already agree with the New Bottom Line and the Spiritual Covenant with America, otherwise the diversity within the caucus will paralyze it from playing the role it should play: to advance those ideas to the larger political party. Imagine, for example, how powerfully impactful an education we could do if we had set up Spiritual Democrats as a way to educate about our New Bottom Line and Spiritual Covenant with America.

Well, we have a full set of ideas about what to do now. You can find them on our website under the title "OK, I've joined the NSP. Now What?"

We are in an amazing place faced with tremendous possibilities. I believe that if we work persistently and conscientiously, we can make a huge impact. But this can't be simply by saying, "right on, Rabbi Lerner, we are behind you, let us know what happens" but rather by saying "yes, I'm going to be an ally either by getting involved in the activities the NSP is recommending or at least by joining the NSP, stretching my finances as much as possible to give very large financial donations, or by spreading the ideas in every part of my life."

The good news from Washington, D.C. is that we are not alone, that there is tremendous enthusiasm throughout this country for a new voice, that there are allies with their own strategies with whom we can work, and as God or the Spirit of the universe is trying to communicate, in this moment, "we are IT."

Many blessings, Rabbi Michael Lerner