

Let's Be Rich, Sermon of Rev. Leela Sinha, on March 22, 2009

Yes, the economy is down. Yes, things are confusing and scary and hard. But we're solid and resilient people, either born or shaped by the wind and water, and as the old Norwegian saying goes, drowning a fish and starving a farmer, it isn't easy.

So really. Since when does some pundit in Washington DC or New York get to decide what we do?

So let's be rich. I mean, what's holding us back? We're 144 years old, well established, own our own house, we're known in the community. What's standing in our way?

We have, as Dr. Seuss would tell us, brains in our heads and feet in our shoes. We have place. We have each other. What's in our way? What IS there to get in our way?

We want prosperity, right? We work for prosperity, we hope for it, some of us pray for it...but we are Americans and If we are the key to our own prosperity—and every red-blooded, bootstrap-raised one of us knows that we are—then we need to take the situation in hand, and we need to do it now. Commentators all across the world and all over the internet are talking about The Economy like it's some vague wispy thing that's out there somewhere, when in fact we are all *the economy* right here on the ground. And at root, the issue is not bonuses for executives we've never met or even stocks in our own portfolios, at root, as far as I can tell, the issue is trust. So let's get down to business.

We have relied on a complex system of checks and balances in this country, not just the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government but also the government balancing the citizens via regulations, and finally the citizens balancing ourselves with credit checks and educational requirements and all the hundreds of other little things we have to prove we can do before we do them. The system has, over time, replaced handshakes and personal knowledge, replaced active and immediate community. It's been important, as the cities and towns and countries have gotten bigger and more populous, and we have snowballed into this global economy, and I'm not complaining

My father came to this continent from India for his education. I'm not complaining. My cousin, a doctor, and his wife, another doctor, have finally ralmost eceived their clearance to come to this country and bring their family. I am not complaining. I have seen the job opportunities created overseas and although outsourcing sometimes makes me crazy I also know what a difference it makes in individual lives and how much better science has worked since people started collaborating across international lines and how much harder it makes to kill people when you know they are just like you, and *I am not complaining*.

But. And. I know that when the community is six billion strong and growing, we need something other than a solid smile and a firm handshake to help us know who can do what.

Enter the regulations and the regulators. Enter the requirements and the certificates. Enter the government.

And it's that system that failed us.

If the bank tells me I can't afford the loan, I probably can't afford it. That's useful. That's regulation that works. And because we have a lot of banks out there, if the bank is wrong, I can get a second opinion.

The problem we have is that the banks were wrong, a lot, about many things. And people overestimated what they could do. And no one stopped them. No one intervened. And a whole cascade of other checks and balances failed. And now?

Now no one trusts anyone anymore.

Our mutual fund managers and our stockbrokers and our banks...and because they're losing their jobs we can add our neighbors and our best friends and ourselves...they are all suspect. We're all suspect. We don't believe anyone can make good on a loan anymore. If we believe we can today, we are afraid we might not be able to do it tomorrow. And since most of the wealthier people in the world make at least some of their money off of loans—either taking them to run their businesses or giving them to companies in the form of stock—that makes the whole house of cards look unstable. Really unstable.

We *are* the economy. And we have GOT to stop chasing our tails. You may think I'm naïve, but I believe that naivete is exactly what is called for. Not foolhardy abandon, but a return to that which Mainers know so well—basic, community-founded, hand-to-hand trust. This spiral could continue forever, or we can be part of the giant, interdependent brake system that is going to change things. Already we're seeing the beginnings. Local Community Supported Agriculture and Community Supported Fisheries are starting up. Those are like stock purchases, local ones, from farmers and fishermen we know. Of course we'll still buy food from our grocery stores, but we can also support our neighbors. By taking a chance on the wind and water and weather with them, we become more closely tied to the people with whom we live and work, and we support THEIR spending in our communities. That keeps our hardware and grocery and feed and seed stores open. That keeps Mardens and Reny's and the Flower Bud open. And the more local stores we keep open the more local people we keep employed. We can't generate enough paper demand to keep the Domtar mill in Bucksport running at full pitch, but what we can do needs doing. And it doesn't need to cost a lot more than whatever we would do anyway, whatever counts as a minimum. What makes a difference, what makes Maine, coastal Maine, this part of Maine a better place to be is that we are so much more self-contained than most places. In a major city they need to get a whole block together to raise food on their land; here, I'd guess we all know at least one farmer, at least one fisherman, at least one person who's good with tools. We may have to give up some conveniences, but we're not going to starve, and we don't need to panic.

At this time of all times we have to keep our arms and our hearts open, and we have to know it's worth it. We have to know it's safe.

And we have to realize that here, right here, in this congregation, among these people, we have the beginnings of salvation. It's appropriate, given our Universalist heritage, but I'm not talking about an afterlife. I'm not talking about angels singing and harps ringing. I'm not talking about clouds and pearly gates. I'm talking about here and now, I'm talking about Ellsworth, Maine, I'm talking about High Street and Main Street and Bridge Street and Water Street. I'm talking about today and tomorrow, I'm talking about change we can see before we die.

I'm talking about our future.

We are at a crossroads. A key crossroads, an important crossroads. We are the town that nearly everyone passes through on their way to somewhere else: Downeast, or Canada or Acadia or Bangor or Southern Maine. We are the town that everyone uses for something basic: groceries or Radio Shack or a coffee shop or a quick bite to eat. We are on the way to nearly everywhere, but it's been a long time since Ellsworth was its own *somewhere*. It's been a long time since Ellsworth was more than convenient to something better.

But we can be. We can be more than a stepping stone. We can be more than a bridge. We can be more than a refueling station. And it's up to us to build it.

Years ago this was just a crossroads, a place where the road to downeast crossed the road from Bangor to Acadia. And years ago someone built us here,

So picture with me that long-ago intersection of dirt roads in the middle of nowhere on a hot, dry afternoon. Imagine a lonesome traveler, looking up and down for a place to stop, a little water, some food, a rest. And imagine her traveling on.

Now imagine that we planted a garden, because we did. Our forbears, our religious ancestors stopped and they planted a garden. But bridge past with future now and look at that crossroads, and imagine the garden is thriving. Absolutely thriving. Picture the tall corn and sunflowers shading the road so it stays cool and damp into midafternoon.

Picture the buckets of water that we carried, and then the hand pump well, and then the spigot we put in. Picture dense rows of beans and cucumbers and tomatoes and squash and even eggplant and peppers. Picture a border of strawberries and an orchard in the background. Look at the soil, transformed by resources and care beneath our feet. Touch its rich blackness. feel it cling and crumble. Look around at your friends and neighbors in the rows, tending or talking, building connections, sharing stories. See the rows stretching away, back and forward. And look, over there on the side, someone adding a circle of benches, comfortable and clean and welcoming, and people passing through figure it won't much hurt if they stay awhile, and they drink and eat and talk. And then they come back. And then they are there, too, pulling weeds, watering, feeding the

hungry who come by for the vegetables we give away, who also come back to work and talk and carry water and at harvest we put a call out to the whole community to come and feast and take some home, and they do, and it is the most enriching things we ever could have done.

This is what church is.

See it's not that we're not doing enough, even though it's easy to feel like it's never enough. Instead, we're at this fabulous confluence where the thing that will feed us and nurture us and lift us up is the same thing that will foster the economy's recovery and the same thing that will strengthen our city and the same thing that will strengthen and invigorate our congregation. It's the four-for-one special at the local cafe, and we have nothing to lose by going for it. Nothing.

Nothing, that is, except our habit of believing that we are the small, insignificant, impotent church on the edge of town. Nothing except our pursuit of things exactly the way they have been. Nothing but our gut-level certainty that we will never have enough to do all the things we could do, that we will never have enough people or money or energy. Nothing except our identity as a downtrodden and unpopular cousin to all the big churches and mainline denominations.

I'm willing to give those things up. But this isn't about what I'm willing to do. Unless YOU are willing to give those things up, really deep-in-your-heart willing, all of MY believing won't make one iota of difference. And I know some of you are sitting out there saying, "Of COURSE I'm willing. I've been willing for YEARS. Let's GO. Where do we START?" And some of you are saying, "I gave those limiting beliefs up in 1971 when we moved up here, or in 2003 when we built the RE wing, or last year when we remodeled the kitchen, or when we voted to increase the budget for the religious educator position or when we committed to having an administrator so we could all stay connected or when we leapt into full time ministry because we needed more than 30 hours a week or when we started enriching our Adult RE offerings or when we began the Green Sanctuary process..." and that's wonderful, and that's critical, and if you found in your passion the key to opening your heart to this congregation's potential GREAT.

But I've got to name a truth here: there are people here today who have not given up the belief that we are better off small, that we are a stronger community when we are less connected, when we do less outreach, when we have fewer resources, that we should be okay just the way we are, that any suggestion that we could be more is a criticism of what has been. And some of those people are upset at me, or offended because I have suggested since my arrival that change would be good, that different would be better, that our call is larger. So I want to be very, very clear: it is wonderful to have built a community. When Bob Dickens talks about coming up here in the early seventies with 20 people in attendance on an average Sunday, and how ministry was just-barely-there, because that's what the congregation could manage, and how the whole building was this

wing, the sanctuary without the community room and without the RE rooms, I am so pleased to see how far this church has come. I am thrilled to know what you have already done. And without the foundational community nothing else is possible. So I am not at all suggesting that we should not have a community.

Quite the opposite.

What I am suggesting is that if we are going to honor that legacy and all the work that everyone has done up to this point, we have to keep going. The potential we have been gifted with by our elders is the potential to transform this place WITH the community that they seeded so well. We are moving from a backyard garden to a community farm, something that people can see from miles away, that they look forward to having food and water and good company, and they stop, and they stay. We are growing more food for everyone, and we are the people who need to plant the extra rows. We are the ones who will bring the seeds, and we are the ones who will plant them. We will water and we will invite our friends in to help us weed. We will put down row cover when the late frost comes and take it up again as the sun warms the earth. We will call our neighbors when the first crops come in and we will pick them up and bring them in so they can help pick the peas and the spinach, and we will invite everyone we meet for a spaghetti feast when the tomato crop threatens to overrun our kitchen.

We will be rich *and we will share*. And that will make all the difference. Because not only is it hard to starve a farmer, it's hard to starve her friends. And that's how it should be. In fact, it should be hard to starve ANYONE—of food, of justice, of spiritual nourishment. And preventing that starvation is a combination of creating abundance and distributing it. Churches survive because that's what we do, in material and spiritual terms, and we are needed. We plant ideas and we sprout hope; we sow love and we grow joy...and we take money and we make profoundly efficient use of it. By adding heart and soul and spirit and volunteers, we make a better return on investment than most stockbrokers can even imagine, because we don't use money to make money, we use money to make a *difference*.

We use money to make a difference.

And that is why we should be rich. That's why we can choose to be rich. Because there is nothing wrong with having power; there is nothing wrong with having money. We are half the power balance, if we band together and stop arguing with each other and start arguing for the world we dream about. In a culture that functions like this one, based on capital exchange, money is a tool for getting things done. There's nothing wrong with having a hammer—we just don't use them to bash peoples' heads in. Money is the same way. And if someone is going to have the tools and the power, why not us? We can do something good with it. We are the ones who can use it to make the differences *we'd* like to see in the world. If we're so sure we're right, then we need to give ourselves the power of our own convictions, and that means bringing our money here.

As individuals we can do a little. But together, we can do a lot.

This is the work, begun by our forefarmers, of a crossroads garden. It is deep and important work. And to make this garden happen we need plants. For plants we need seeds.

And stewardship money--your money--is those seeds.

Go back to that image of the sun-drenched summer crossroads, overflowing with food and people and laughter. Look at that garden. Every seed that grows there is multiplied five or fifty or a thousand times over. Every fruit holds the beginnings of next year's crop; all those bushels have seeds enough for a farm. There is no better way to invest than to make your money the beginning of generations.

Let's begin those generations right here. Let's build community. Let's build trust.

Let's begin.

Blessed be,
and amen.